

No 444. APR. 21st 1911. 5 Cents.

WILD WEST WEEKLY.

YOUNG WILD WEST AND SENOR SANTO.

By AN OLD SCOUT.



"Does your sprained ankle hurt?" Wild asked Arietta, as he waded ashore with her in his arms. She nodded. Just then Senor Santo and his gang appeared in the bushes.

FRANK TOUSEY
PUBLISHER.
24 Union Square, New-York.

WILD WEST WEEKLY

A Magazine Containing Stories, Sketches, Etc., of Western Life

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1911, in the office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by Frank Tousey, Publisher, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 444.

NEW YORK, APRIL 21, 1911.

PRICE 5 CENTS.

Young Wild West and Senior Santo

OR,

THE BRIGANDS OF THE BORDER

By AN OLD SCOUT

CHAPTER I.

SENIOR SANTO IS BAFFLED.

In the extreme southwestern part of New Mexico, where a half-square is formed as it joins old Mexico, is to be found the range of mountains known as the Sierra Hacheta.

At the time of which we write, this particular spot was one of the wildest and most unfrequented along the entire border.

But one day some lucky prospectors struck it rich on the east slope of the range, and none of them knew whether they were upon American or Mexican soil.

But it mattered little to them, since the gold dust was panning out wonderfully.

In less than two months after the find others came to the spot, and the result was that a regular trail, leading all the way from Tombstone, was soon made.

This trail ran for the most part all the way along the Mexican border, and it was not long before the gold-seekers, who went that way, found dangers and difficulties presenting themselves in the shape of Mexican bandits, who seemed to be content to prey upon the lucky miners who were returning with their wealth, rather than dig for the precious metal themselves.

It was a warm afternoon in mid-winter that we find a rather handsome young man riding slowly along the trail in a lonely part of the picturesque range.

He was a Mexican, and one of the sort who take great pride in their wearing apparel, and who are quite common in that part of the country.

His fancy attire was complete, from the wide-brimmed sombrero down to the silver-plated spurs that were attached to the high heels of his riding-boots.

The Mexican was well armed, for he carried a carbine of American manufacture, a brace of revolvers and a hunting-knife.

Strapped to the high pack saddle was a blanket and a water bottle, which showed that the lone rider was prepared to go into camp anywhere and enjoy what comforts were to be had from his blanket and the water he carried, until he reached a town or mining camp where he might find better accommodations.

The black mustache that adorned the horseman's upper lip was waxed at the ends, while his face was clean-shaven.

This went to prove that he must have taken considerable pride in his appearance, since there was nothing in the way of a barber shop within miles of him.

The horse he rode was a fine-looking bay, and the saddle and other trappings were of the finest.

The Mexican appeared to be in no hurry, for his horse was going at a walk. But he acted as though he was on the watch for some one, for he kept glancing ahead almost continually.

As the trail brought him to the mouth of a narrow ravine he brought his horse to a halt, and shading his eyes with his hand, peered straight ahead for the space of a second or two, while at the same time he listened as though he expected to hear sounds.

Suddenly his face lighted up and then he started his horse forward at a canter.

The horseman had detected the faint sounds made by approaching horses, and it was evidently his intention to hurry forward to meet them.

On through the ravine he rode, and when he had covered a distance of perhaps two hundred yards he had the satisfaction of seeing four horsemen riding swiftly toward him.

They were all Mexicans, and for the most were attired similarly to himself.

"They have come at last," he muttered, in Spanish, as he smiled and shot a glance the way he had come. "I feared they might be too late. But it's all right now."

We will be in time to intercept the small party of Americans who are on their way to dig for Mexican gold. If it were not for the fact that there are three ladies with them I would let them go on and get the gold. Then when they came back I would take it from them. But as one of the señoritas is very beautiful, and has completely won my heart, though I had not long to gaze upon her, I have changed my mind. She must be the wife of Senor Santo, the king of the Brigands of the Border. Ha! ha! ha!"

There was a musical ring to the villain's laugh, though to have heard it one would have been apt to think that there was something cruel about it, after all.

Senor Santo, as he called himself, brought his horse to a halt as the four Mexicans rode up, and when they had saluted him in military style, he nodded and said:

"Well, you have got here, have you? I am very glad, for we have some business on hand."

"Which way are they coming, senor?" one of the men asked.

"From the west," was the reply.

"Have they plenty of money?"

"That I don't know. But there is a very beautiful girl with them. There are two, in fact, and a young woman who is the wife of one of the party, I presume. I spied upon them while they were resting at noon, and from what I could hear them say I am satisfied of this. This young woman's husband is a very tall American, typical of his race. He has long, dark hair and a mustache, and he shows signs of having spent much of his time in the mountains. He is really the only man belonging to the party, for there are but two boys besides the ladies I have mentioned and two of the Chinese race, who, no doubt, are servants. They are well equipped, and from their general appearance I would take it that they must have plenty of money. I had scarcely looked upon one of the American girls than it occurred to me that she would make a splendid bride for me. You all know how many chances I have had to take a beautiful wife. But never once have I felt inclined that way until I set eyes on the fair señorita, whose hair is of a beautiful golden color, and whose eyes are as blue as the azure skies. Don't think it strange to hear your leader talk this way, for there are times in the lives of all men when they are captivated by a pair of eyes of the opposite sex."

The four smiled at this, but the King of the Brigands of the Border, as he had called himself, did not seem to be offended in the least.

"How long before they will get here, Senor Santo?" one of them asked, after a pause.

"Very soon, I think, though they could not travel nearly as fast as I did, since their pack-horses are pretty well loaded. I think we had better ride on to the end of the ravine and wait there for them. There are five of us, and that will be quite enough to attend to this affair. I suppose the rest of our band have had good luck, since they were instructed by me just what to do when the party of returning miners came along. They must have settled accounts with them long before this, so after we have finished the work I have planned we will ride to the cave, taking my intended bride with us, and meet them there."

The four nodded, just as though they had not the least doubt that it would turn out exactly as their leader planned.

Senor Santo gave the word, and they all rode through the ravine at an easy pace.

It was nearly three miles that they had to go before they reached the end of it, and then they came to a halt among the rocks, where a mountain stream tumbled from the cliffs above and went on its way, snake-like fashion, until it was swallowed in the sands of the level stretch below.

It was certainly a fine place for an ambuscade, since the Mexicans could lie behind the rocks and spring out upon the unsuspecting travelers as they reached the narrow mouth of the huge fissure that ran through a portion of the mountain.

The brigands dismounted, and permitting one of them to take charge of his horse, Senor Santo sat upon a rock and coolly rolled a cigarette.

When he had lighted this and puffed away for a minute or two in silence, he nodded to one of his men and said:

"Pedro, you had better ascend to the top of the cliff and watch for them. They surely must come soon now."

"Si, senor," retorted the man addressed, speaking in Spanish, and meaning that he agreed with him, and then he quickly left the spot and proceeded to climb the cliff.

He had barely reached the top, from which he could see quite a long distance back into the ravine, than he waved his hat in triumph and then came hurrying down to those waiting below.

"They are coming, Senor Santo!" he exclaimed. "Get ready for them."

"Well, we haven't much to do in the way of getting ready," was the cool reply, as the brigand leader threw away his cigarette. "We must simply wait until they get within a few yards of us, and then we will rush from behind the rocks and surprise them. There will be no need of shooting them, I think, for they will have no chance to offer resistance. But if it should happen that they do fire at us we will kill all but the females of the party."

The villains nodded and gripped their carbines to show that they would not hesitate to obey the instructions of their leader.

Crouching behind the rocks, their horses tied in a little hollow behind them, the brigands waited for the approaching party.

It was not long before they could hear the hoofbeats of the horses, and a few seconds later Senor Santo removed his hat and peered from behind a rock.

He saw them, and an exultant smile let up his handsome face.

Riding at the head of the little column were a boy and girl, and as he looked at them, Senor Santo could not help thinking that they were a very handsome couple, indeed.

The boy was attired in a fancy hunting-suit of buckskin, and with a wealth of light chestnut hair hanging over his shoulders, and a broad sombrero tipped back gracefully upon his head, he certainly made a handsome, not to say, dashing appearance.

He was mounted upon a clean-limbed sorrel stallion,

and the ease and grace with which he rode showed that he was a master of the art of riding.

The girl at his side wore a combination riding and hunting suit of buckskin and some bright-colored material that blended superbly.

Her golden hair was just enough in contrast with that of her companion's to add to the picture.

Her horse was a cream-white mustang of the pony type, and she, too, showed how well used to the saddle she must be.

Behind these two came the tall man Senor Santo had spoken of to his men, while at his side was a rather pretty young man of perhaps twenty-five.

Following them closely was another boy and girl, all being attired in a fashion similar to the couple in the lead.

Bringing up the rear were two typical Chinamen, who were leading a pair of well-loaded pack-horses.

Senor Santo took all this in in the short space of half a minute.

Then he raised his hand for his companions to be ready.

Just as the boy and girl in the lead were about to emerge from the end of the defile the brigand leader sprang to his feet and, leveling a revolver at the couple, called out:

"Halt!"

At the same instant his companions sprang over the rocks and pointed their carbines at the party.

The boy and girl reined in their steeds instantly, though neither seemed to be half as much surprised as Senor Santo thought they would be.

"Hold up your hands!" called out the brigand leader, in a commanding voice, speaking in good English.

"What is the trouble, my friends?" the boy on the sorrel stallion asked, as coolly as though it was nothing out of the ordinary that was happening. "I reckon you must have made a mistake."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Senor Santo laughed. "Are you a fool, boy? Don't you know that by pressing the trigger of this pistol I can send you to instant death?"

"Well, you might do that all right, but I think you are only trying to frighten us. Just put your gun down and we'll talk it over. We are not to be so easily scared as all this, you know."

"You are a very cool hand, as you Americans say," the brigand retorted, the smile still showing on his face. "But I think you will find out, presently, that your life is in danger. You heard me order you to hold up your hands! Now do as I told you, or I will shoot you dead!"

"All right, senor. If you mean it, I suppose we will have to obey."

As he said this the boy's left hand went up, his right following it.

But the right only went up a short distance, and suddenly a sharp report sounded.

Senor Santo uttered a startled cry and dropped his revolver.

The blood was streaming from his wrist, too, and surprised as he was, he knew the bullet had grazed him.

His four companions were so startled that instead of opening fire on the travelers they turned and ran for the shelter of the rocks.

Crack! crack!

Two of them failed to reach the rocks in time and fell to the ground.

The boy on the sorrel stallion had shown how quick he could shoot, and how to find the mark, too.

"Get back there!" he called out, and then, wheeling his horse around he rode back into the ravine, followed by his girl companion.

Senor Santo had not moved a foot from the spot. He stood there as though he had been dazed, and not until the party he had held up had disappeared from view did he come to his full senses.

He looked at his wrist and found it was only a slight flesh wound, and then picking up the revolver that had dropped from his hand, he ran behind the rocks, where the two Mexicans who had escaped were huddled in fear.

Then it was that a string of Spanish oaths came from the lips of the baffled brigand chief.

His two companions listened, but did not venture to say a word.

"Caramba!" cried Santo, when he found they refrained from speaking. "Why don't you say something? What does this mean, anyhow?"

"The American boy was too quick for you, Senor Santo," the man called Pedro answered. "He shot as quick as lightning."

"Did you see him shoot?"

"I saw him shoot your pistol from your hand."

"But did he drop our two companions?"

"Yes, Senor Santo."

"Well, why didn't you shoot him?"

Pedro hung his head. He was unable to give a satisfactory answer, he knew, so he said nothing.

The brigand leader flew into a terrible rage again, and it looked for a minute or two as though he was going to wreak his spite upon his two men by killing them.

But he soon quieted down, however, and then nodding to Pedro, said:

"Mount and ride to the cave and bring as many men as there are there here. I will stay with Gonzales and watch the mouth of the defile. They can never come out and pass us alive, for we will shoot them down from behind the rocks here. Go, and come back as quickly as you can. I have sworn to make the beautiful American girl my bride, and when Senor Santo swears to a thing he never goes back on it. Away with you, Pedro."

Pedro acted as though he did not half like the idea of leaving, but no doubt he knew what would happen to him if he dared to disobey, so he crept over to where the horses were and selecting his mount, led the animal along for a short distance, and then swung himself into the saddle.

As he galloped away and disappeared behind a big pile of rocks, a hundred yards distant, Senor Santo gave a nod of satisfaction, and turning to Gonzales, his sole companion now, he exclaimed:

"If you fail to shoot the Americans when they attempt to come through, I will shoot you! You know me, Gonzales."

"I will do as you say, Senor Santo," came the reply.

Five minutes passed, and then a stone came rattling down the side of the cliff behind them.

Instinctively, the eyes of the two villains turned that way.

A sharp cry came from the lips of Gonzales, while Senor Santo turned as white as a sheet.

Standing on a narrow ledge that was not more than twenty feet above them was the dashing-looking boy who had baffled the bandits but a short time before!

CHAPTER II.

YOUNG WILD WEST SHOWS UP IN TRUE FORM.

The reader has, of course, guessed who it was who had succeeded in getting the best of Senor Santo.

It was no other than Young Wild West, the well-known Boy Hero who was generally known as the Champion Dead-shot of the West; and it is doubtful if any one living could have succeeded in baffling the Mexicans as he had done. His aim in life was to do all the good he could.

But it was all due to his wonderful coolness and presence of mind.

It was not the first time the boy had been placed in such a position, so it was not strange that he displayed such coolness when surprised by the five scoundrels.

He was the sworn enemy of crooks and bad men.

The girl who had been riding at his side was his sweetheart, charming, golden-haired Arietta Murdock, a true Western girl; and, like her dashing young lover, she had been quick to think and to act.

The result was that she turned her horse almost as quickly as the boy did, and they got back into the ravine in a hurry.

But it was really not necessary for them to move so quickly, since Young Wild West had dropped two of the brigands, and the others showed no disposition to put up a fight just then.

As soon as they found themselves safely out of sight of the three survivors of the attacking party, the boy exclaimed:

"Well, that was quite a surprise, but I reckon it wasn't all a one-sided one!"

"I reckon it wasn't, Wild," the tall man with the long black hair and mustache answered, a grim smile on his tanned and weather-beaten face.

This was Cheyenne Charlie, the famous scout and Indian fighter, who took great pride in being called one of Young Wild West's partners, though he was fully ten years older than the boy.

The young woman who had been riding at his side when the hold-up was made was his wife, as Senor Santo had guessed.

Her name was Anna, and as she had insisted on traveling about on horseback with her husband, it was made possible for Arietta and the other girl of the party to accompany them, under her care.

The latter was Eloise Gardner. She was the sweetheart of the other boy, who was Jim Dart, also a partner of Young Wild West.

The two Chinamen, who must not be forgotten, were brothers, named Hop Wah and Wing Wah.

They acted as cook and handy man for the party.

As we find them down near the Mexican border, our hero and his companions were on one of their horseback trips in search of excitement, adventure and fortune.

The fact that Young Wild West and his partners drew big incomes from their mining interests in different parts of the Wild West made it possible for them to go and come when they pleased, and as they never felt quite at ease unless something in the way of danger threatened, and they were in the open air, they chose to spend the greater part of their time in riding from one place to another, where civilization was in its infancy.

Young Wild West had heard of the great strikes that were being made in the Sierra Hacheta Range, and he decided to come down that way and make an investigation.

It was not so much for the purpose of striking a rich gold mine as it was for the adventures that might be found there.

The boy seemed to have been born with a determination to rout out all the lawless characters he came across, and his adventures were engaged in that pastime, as it might be called, had been many.

The thrilling escapes he had made ran up well into the hundreds, but his coolness, good judgment and good luck had brought him safely through them all, and he was continually looking for more.

It was about the same with his two partners, and the girls, who had become so used to that sort of life, did not mind the dangers they so often came in contact with.

Of course, there were times when they wished they were anywhere but in the wilderness.

But as they had always come safely out of the difficulties they fell into they soon forgot about them.

While our friends had heard of the band of brigands that operated along the trail near the Mexican border, they had not been even thinking of them when the hold-up occurred.

Thus it will be seen how cool and courageous Young Wild West really was.

Taken by surprise, he had quickly turned the tables on the five Mexicans, and had shot two of them after disarming their leader without receiving so much as a scratch or having a shot fired at him in return.

"I think I know just who that fellow is," the young deadshot went on to say, as Cheyenne Charlie gave vent to his opinion. "He is Senor Santo, the terrible Brigand of the Border. We heard all about him in Tombstone, you know, and a fellow over there gave me a pretty good description of him. He said he was a very fancy-looking greaser and quite handsome. I had a good look at that fellow as he stood there covering me with his gun, and I reckon he is Senor Santo, all right. Well, I wonder how he feels now. No doubt he had an idea he was going to have an easy thing with us. But I think he is satisfied now that he made a big mistake."

"If he ain't satisfied you kin bet your life he will be afore we git through with him, Wild," the scout answered, quickly, showing how ready he was to tackle the brigands.

All hands were keeping their eyes toward the outlet

of the defile, though none of them had the least idea that the villains would come through to attack them.

"It seems rather strange that they should hold us up on our way to the gold diggin's," Jim Dart observed, with a shrug of his shoulders. "According to the reports we've received, they usually attack those who are going back well laden with gold dust."

"Well, I suppose they saw us coming, and thought they might as well see what they could get from us," Young Wild West answered, in his cool and easy way. "They have found out, all right, and the chances are they wish they hadn't interfered with us. But if we are going on through, I reckon it will be a good idea for me to climb up to the cliff and see what they are doing. The rest of you remain right where you are and keep a sharp watch."

The boy quickly dismounted and selecting a place where it would be quite easy for him to climb upward, he went at it without delay.

Strong and athletic as he was, it was easy for him to make his way upward, and he did so without making a sound, either.

As he neared the top of the cliff he could see two of the Mexicans crouching behind the rocks.

It happened that Pedro had already taken his departure.

Wild, as our hero was called by his friends for short, was a little surprised when he saw there were but two of them.

But when he happened to look over the level stretch and saw one of them riding swiftly away, he understood.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "I reckon Senor Santo has sent for help. They mean to get us, if they can. Well, I will soon show them how foolish they are for thinking of such a thing."

He crawled along until he reached a ledge, and then stepped lightly until he was almost directly over the two brigands.

Seeing that they were not likely to look up very soon, he rolled a stone down toward them.

"How are you, Senor Santo?" he asked, coolly, while a smile played about his lips, as he noticed how startled the leader of the villains was. "You have sent for help, I see."

Senor Santo, who saw the deadly revolver in the hand of the boy, and knew that a slight pressure upon the trigger would send a bullet through his heart, at first made no reply.

But he was a pretty cool sort of man, and slowly drawing himself to his full height, he gazed at the boy with something like defiance, and said:

"Are you ready to surrender?"

"Hardly!" and Young Wild West laughed. "I might ask you that question, though."

"A word from me and you will be shot dead, for I have plenty of men lying behind the rocks over there," said the brigand leader, bluffly.

"All right, tell them to go ahead and shoot, Senor Santo."

"Caramba!" exclaimed the villain, finding that his ruse would not work. "Who are you, boy?"

"Would you like to know?"

"Yes, you are a regular fiend. Who are you?"

"Well, my name is Young Wild West. Are you glad to meet me?"

Senor Santo gave a violent start. It was plain that he had heard the name before.

"You have got me dead to rights, as you Americans say," he observed, after a pause, at the same time shrugging his shoulders and looking about him, helplessly. "What do you propose to do?"

"Well, if I did the right thing I would shoot you dead and then drop your companion, but I don't like to do a thing like that, so I am going to give you a chance. I will come down there and fight you."

"I don't want to fight you," Santo answered, quickly. "I stopped you for the purpose of robbing you and I failed. If you want to take me a prisoner, come and do so. But I tell you plainly that I will not be taken alive."

"Well, I don't know as it will make much difference whether you are taken alive or dead. But just now I am not in the humor to take you. I am going to let you go, with the expectation of meeting you later on. Of course, you will feel like having revenge upon me, and that is just what I like. I am never happier than when I know I have got an enemy looking for me. But I will tell you right now that no matter how you go about it, I will get you in the end. Now, then, the best thing you can do is to mount your horse. Your companion can do likewise, and we will ride along with you until you find your friends. Then if you feel disposed to do so, you can call them to come out and rob us. How does that strike you, Senor Santo?"

"Caramba!"

The face of the villain was black with rage now, showing that the bantering way of the boy irritated him greatly.

Wild now looked for a way to get down from the ledge, and finding that he could do so by going a few yards further along, started that way, but never once put down his gun.

Reaching the ground below, he walked up to the two Mexicans and motioned them to mount their horses, at the same time saying:

"You heard what I just told you, Senor Santo. Go ahead and do as I say."

Gonzales quickly made a move to go toward the horses.

"Hold on!" said our hero, sternly. "I reckon you will both go together. I am not going to give you a chance to take a sly shot at me, Mr. Greaser. I am not in the habit of doing things like that. I have met too many of your kind before, you see."

Gonzales stopped instantly and awaited further orders.

"Come on through, all of you!" Wild called out to his companions. "I have got the two rascals dead to rights."

"Whoopee! whoopee! Wow! wow! Yip, yip, yip!" shouted Cheyenne Charlie, and then he came riding out of the defile at a canter.

Jim Dart was right behind him, and then the girls came along, with the two Chinamen in the rear.

"Where's ther other galoot, Wild?" the scout asked, when he saw that there were but two there.

"Oh, Senor Santo sent him for help, I suppose," was the cool reply. "Just relieve these two fellows of their weapons. It will be safe, I think."

"Right yer are, Wild," and the scout was off his horse in a twinkling.

He quickly took the weapons from the two men, and as Gonzales growled something in his own language as it was done, he turned him around and seizing his collar, quickly, administered a sound kick to him.

"There, you dog of a greaser! How do yer like that?"

Gonzales hissed something that was unintelligible, so Charlie gave him another kick that sent him sprawling.

"How about you?" he asked, turning to Senor Santo.

"Shall I muss you up a little, too?"

"You have me in your power, senor, so you can do as you like," was the retort.

"Let him alone, Charlie," spoke up our hero. "He hates us enough as it is, so there is no use in ruffling his feelings any further. Senor Santo has found those who are more than his match to-day, so that is quite enough to make him feel down-hearted, I think."

The boy now turned to the two silent forms that lay where they had dropped when he fired so quickly.

He saw that they were both stunned, and after looking them over he turned to the brigand leader and said:

"I suppose you will want to give these carcasses some care, so you had better tie them upon the two extra horses you have here. Go ahead and do it right away, for we are in a hurry to get somewhere to camp for the night."

Senor Santo evidently did not like to be ordered about in that way. But there was no help for it, so he called his companion, and the two did as they were directed.

Neither Wild nor his partners offered to help them the least bit, but waited patiently until the two were tied upon the horses the men had ridden.

Then Wild nodded to the leader and said:

"Now, then, get on your own horse."

Gonzales did not have to be told to do this, and he was in the saddle before the leader.

"Ride on ahead!" came the command from the boy. "Remember what I told you. When you get within call of your friends, you can shout for them to come out and tackle us, if you have a mind to. But the moment you do this you will die, Senor Santo. That is something that you must not forget."

There was no reply to this, and though he must have been greatly crestfallen and humiliated, Senor Santo rode along ahead of the party, leading one of the horses that carried a brigand.

"Well, boys," said Young Wild West, nodding to his partners, "I reckon we have got our hands full just now. I suppose there will be some trouble in getting rid of these two fellows."

"There wouldn't be much trouble about it if I had my way, Wild," Cheyenne Charlie answered, and he touched his neck with his forefinger, significantly. "We've got plenty of rope, ain't we?"

"Yes, that's right, but it won't do to lynch them. That is not in our line of business, Charlie."

"I know it ain't, but there's been lots of times when I think it oughter be in our line, jest ther same."

"Well, we won't do anything like that just now. While I was standing upon the ledge I made up my mind to let Senor Santo go. I told him I felt sure that he would look

for revenge, and that means that we will meet him again. I also told him that no matter what he did he would get the worst of it. I feel satisfied that he will, too."

"If he don't he'll be ther first one, Wild," and the scout smiled grimly as he spoke.

Anna and Eloise did not seem to be exactly at their ease, though Arietta did not seem to mind the situation in the least.

She laughingly told them that it was only another little adventure that had been added to the long list.

"If we came all the way down here without meeting the Brigands of the Border, as they are called, we would not feel satisfied, girls," Young Wild West's sweetheart declared, laughingly. "Of course, we met them a little sooner than we expected to. But it's all the same."

"Isn't there a reward offered for the capture of Senor Santo?" the scout's wife ventured to ask.

"Yes, I suppose there is, but we are not looking for a reward, you know."

"Well, I think it would be just as well if Wild were to turn them over to the authorities."

"Yes, but where are the authorities? That is the question."

"Well, there must be Mexican soldiers located along the border-line somewhere."

"No doubt, and if we should happen to come across them just now, Wild would surely turn the prisoners over to them. But I hardly think we will meet any Rurales, or any one else very soon. You must remember that, according to what we were told, we have nearly another day to travel before we will reach the gold diggings."

"You have got that just right, Et," Young Wild West spoke up, smiling at his golden-haired sweetheart. "It is not likely that we will meet any one we could turn the prisoners over to. We will just take them along until we get close to where their headquarters are. I am satisfied that we are going in the right direction, for the other greaser went this way, and I can see the fresh hoof-prints of his horse."

They rode along for about half an hour, and then Senor Santo, who had been silent up to that time, turned his head and fixing his gaze upon the handsome face of Young Wild West, he said:

"Senor West, can't we come to an agreement?"

"Well, what have you to offer?" the boy answered.

"You let me go free now and I promise you not to interfere with you or your friends again."

"Do you mean that, Senor Santo?"

"I am a gentleman and a man of my word."

"I doubt it very much, senor. But since you have made the proposition I will agree to it. Go on. You are free to go where you please."

"You have no use for the weapons you gathered from us," and the brigand leader nodded at the two Chinamen, who had taken possession of the carbines, revolvers and knives that had belonged to the injured Mexicans, as well as the two they had made prisoners.

"Well, no; we are pretty well fixed in that line. But I reckon we had better keep them, just the same."

"Just as you say, Senor West."

Wild thought a moment. He was not one bit afraid of

anything the brigand chief might do. He really had no use for the weapons, so he decided to give them to him.

"I suppose you would be satisfied if I gave you what belonged to you and your greaser companion?" the boy asked.

"I will be satisfied with anything that suits you," came the reply.

"Well, I don't know just how far we are from your haunt, so I reckon you can take your weapons. Ride back there and our Chinamen will give them to you."

Senor Santo took off his hat and made a polite bow, just as though a great favor had been bestowed upon him.

He turned the horse he had been leading over to Gonzales and rode back to the two Chinamen, who at once allowed him to take what he wanted.

"Thank you very much, Senor West," he said, as he rode back, his carbine slung over his shoulder and his revolvers hanging from his belt. Now I feel better. This has been quite an adventure this afternoon. It is one such as I never took part in before, and I never will forget it as long as I live. But you will find that I am a man of honor. I have given you my word that I will never interfere with you again."

"Nor my companions, either?" added Wild, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Nor your companions, either."

"All right, Senor Santo. I believe you are telling a bare-faced lie, but we will let it go at that. Now, then, light out."

The brigand leader again doffed his hat and bowed.

Then he turned sharply to the right and entered a pass that ran through among the rocks on the mountainside.

"Ah!" exclaimed Cheyenne Charlie, suddenly, "that's ther way ther other galoot went. I kin see ther tracks of his horse. No wonder he stopped here, Wild."

"Well, that's all right, Charlie. We will keep right on going, and we won't forget to keep a watch behind us, too. Come on."

They all set out at a gallop now, and the spot where the two brigands had disappeared was soon left behind them.

It must have been that they had been informed wrongly as to the distance to the gold diggings, for in less than half an hour after leaving the brigands they came in sight of a mining camp that nestled in a little valley a mile below them.

"I reckon we've got here a day ahead of time, Wild," said Cheyenne Charlie, as he nodded toward the group of shanties and tents. "That galoot in Tombstone, who made out that he knowed all about this part of ther country, was a little off in his judgment as to ther time it took ter git here."

"He certainly was, Charlie," the young deadshot replied. "But it is all the better, for we'll stop at this mining camp for a while and do a little brigand hunting. We will be quite handy to Senor Santo's hang-out, and that will make it all the better."

CHAPTER III.

AT GREASER CREEK.

Young Wild West and his partners did not forget to keep a watch behind them as they rode down the crooked trail that led to the mining camp in the valley below.

They were not so sure that the brigands, as the lawless band of villains called themselves, might not ride up and attack them at any moment.

But nothing of the sort happened, and in a few minutes they had reached the little valley and were riding toward the group of shanties and tents that were located along the bank of a shallow stream, which was fed by the melting snow on the mountain tops.

Everything seemed to be brand-new, even to the tents, which were remarkably white for miners' tents.

But the shanties had been nailed together in a hurry, and some of them looked grotesque enough, since no such tools as a level or square had been used in their construction.

But the camp itself was about like the general run of them, and Young Wild West and his friends had been to so many that it was not at all new to them.

Along the bank of the creek for over a mile men could be seen working, though it was near quitting-time for the day when the young deadshot and his companions arrived.

"Wild," said Arietta, as they rode along the bank of the creek toward a little bridge, so they might cross and get into the camp proper, "some one in Tombstone told you the name of this place I believe."

"Yes, Et, it is Greaser Creek, unless we have struck another one that was not known to our informant."

"Oh, this must be the one, then. There was only one mining camp down this way, so we heard."

"Well, we will soon find out. There's the shanty hotel, just the other side of the bridge. Like all of them we find, isn't it?"

"Yes, Wild, all such places look alike in small camps like this. They build the shanties one story, and then put up a false front to make them appear as though there was an upstairs part to them. I can't understand why they do that."

"Well, it is just to make a show, I suppose. But that shanty hotel is quite a big one. It must be fifty feet in width and over a hundred in depth. But I suppose the proprietor does lots of business, for gold-seekers have been coming this way for the past month or two."

They rode across the bridge, which was a rather rickety affair, though quite strong enough to carry the horses, one at a time.

If there had been no bridge there it would have been easy for them to cross the creek, since, as far as they could see, the water was not deeper in any part of it than a foot or two.

Half a dozen loungers were sitting and standing in front of the hotel, if such it could be called, while in the door stood a portly, smooth-faced man, conspicuous in a blue flannel shirt, the sleeves of which were rolled to his elbows.

As our friends rode up and came to a halt before the hotel, according to their usual custom on entering mining camps, the individual stepped from the doorway, and taking his pipe from his mouth, nodded pleasantly and called out:

"Hello, strangers! Jest come down from Tombstone, I s'pose?"

"That's right," Wild answered, as he dismounted and started toward him. "Is this place called Greaser Creek?" "Sure as you're born it is, young feller. What do you think of it?"

"Oh, it looks all right. How is the dust panning out here?"

"Fine," and the man nodded as though he was very glad of it, too. "Everything is workin' lovely here. As many as a dozen has got rich an' left for home. If we ain't interfered with by ther Mexicans, we'll dig out many millions of dust inside of a year, an' don't yer forgit it."

"Why, is this land on Mexican territory?" Wild asked.

"Well, no one seems ter know about that. Somebody did say there was a monument right along here some place, that had been put up to show where ther line was. But it wasn't here when I got here, so I don't know nothin' about it."

"I see. Probably the monument was destroyed, then."

"I don't know nothin' about that. It ain't none of my business, I s'pose."

"No, of course not. You're here to make money in the hotel business, and it is natural that you should want to be allowed to remain here."

"That's it. I've got a United States Government license, too, 'cause I think if it comes to a show-down, my place will be found to be on American soil. But even if it ain't I'll manage ter git along all right. Ther boys around here will all back me, so let ther greasers come an' make trouble, if they want ter."

"Have they tried to make trouble for you yet?"

"Not ther Mexican authorities, but there's a gang of greasers what hangs along ther border what's makin' lots of trouble for them what leaves here now an' then. They call themselves ther Brigands of ther Border. I s'pose they think brigand sounds a little better than bandits or common thieves. They've got a mighty smart galoot leadin' 'em, too. He calls himself Senor Santo, an' he's got a way of disguisin' himself so he kin go anywhere he wants ter, an' no one knows who he is. It's been told to me that he's been here lots of time, right in my place, too; but no one knowed who he was at ther time."

"Well, we happen to know something about Senor Santo, boss. We met him a little over an hour ago."

"What! You met ther brigands, yer say?"

"Well, there were only four of them when we met them. Two of them died rather suddenly, too."

"Git out! Tell us all about it, young feller. But who are yer, anyhow? I sorter think I know yer."

"Well, maybe you can guess, then."

"You're Young Wild West, I'll bet."

"You have got that right, boss."

"I knowed it," and the landlord of the hotel nodded to the loungers in a triumphant sort of way.

The loungers stared hard at the boy, and then looked the rest of the party over with interest.

One of them acted as though he did not take a great deal of stock in any of them, and he whispered something to the others.

Wild did not fail to notice this, and he realized right away that the fellow was in the humor to make trouble.

"If yer want ter stop at my hotel I'll try an' make

room for yer, though I'm putty well filled up an' don't know what I kin do with ther women folks," the proprietor went on, shaking his head and looking as though he was somewhat puzzled.

"Well, I reckon we won't stop with you," Wild answered. "We are so used to camping out that we won't mind it now. We'll put up our tents along the bank of the creek somewhere, so we won't interfere with any one, and stop here for a few days, perhaps. You see, we have made up our minds to clean up this gang of brigands. As I just said, two of them went under this afternoon."

"Was Senor Santo with them?"

"Yes, he was with them, and we took him a prisoner, but let him go when we got near his hiding-place."

"Let him go!"

The hotelkeeper was astounded.

"What did yer do that for, Young Wild West?"

"Well, you see, we had an idea that Greaser Creek was a great deal further away than it was. If we had known it was so close by we would have certainly brought Senor Santo and the other greaser right here."

"Young feller, I don't believe you met Senor Santo any more than I did."

It was the man who had been whispering to his companions who said this, and he took a step toward our hero and looked at him boldly.

Wild sized him up quickly, and made up his mind that the fellow was a genuine ruffian, such as are so common at mining camps.

He was a pretty big man, and looked as though he would prove to be a formidable opponent in a fight.

But that was not bothering Young Wild West a bit.

It never made any difference to him how big a man was or how strong he might be.

If he was insulted he would resent it as quickly as he would if the insulter had been but a wizened-faced little chap with scarcely any legs to stand upon.

"So you don't believe we met Senor Santo, eh?" the boy asked, in his cool and easy way.

"No, I don't."

"Did you ever meet him?"

"I have seen him a few times."

"Are you an American?"

"I sartinly am. I was born in El Paso."

"But you have got greaser blood in you, have you not?"

"That's none of your business, young feller. Don't git too sassy or I'll smack yer over. I ain't in ther habit of bein' sassed by men, let alone boys."

"Is that so?"

The young deadshot smiled as he spoke, and then again looking the big fellow over, he added:

"What is your name?"

"I don't know as that's any of your business, but I'll tell yer if yer want ter know. They call me Big Dan."

"Your name must be Daniel, then, and because you are big they call you Big Dan. I understand. Well, Big Dan, I say that we met Senor Santo and that we took him a prisoner, but let him go, because we did not have any idea that we were so close to a mining camp."

"An' I say yer lie, if yer say that!"

"My friend, I don't like to be called a liar, so you had better take that back."

"I never took nothin' back I ever said yet."

"Well, you are going to take it back, just the same, this time. There is always a beginning, you know. Now, then, if you don't apologize for calling me a liar, I am going to thrash you."

"You thrash me! Ha, ha, ha!" and the bad man roared with laughter.

True to his principles, Wild started right in to make him apologize.

His left fist shot out suddenly and caught the unsuspecting rascal between the eyes.

Big Dan's laughter turned to a cry of dismay, and he staggered back, almost falling to the ground.

The rest of the loungers got out of the way in a hurry, and looked astounded.

Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart quickly dismounted now and took positions where they could watch the villain's friends, and see that they did not interfere.

"Are you going to apologize?" Wild asked, as he stepped after the staggering ruffian.

Big Dan uttered an oath and, gathering his muscles, made a leap, swinging both fists as he did so.

But he might as well have tried to catch a butterfly as to hit the agile boy before him.

Wild danced out of his way and then swung his right hard, catching him behind the ear.

Down went the big man in a heap, for the blow had temporarily stunned him.

The proprietor of the hotel had been startled at first, but he now gave an approving nod and said:

"It's about time Big Dan met his match, Young Wild West. Give it to him good. It will make a better man of him, 'cause he's been bullyin' everybody here for a long time, an' he don't seem ter want ter do any work. All he does is to hang around my place all day an' wait for some one ter treat him, or to git in a game of cards, so he kin skin ther miners out of what they've made durin' ther day. I ain't afraid of him, an' he knows it, so that's why I'm tellin' you a little of his history."

Whether the bad man heard this or not it is hard to tell. Anyhow, he did not appear to, for he lay upon the ground, twisting about and acting as though he was trying to get up and was unable to do so.

Wild stood over him, and finally he arose to a sitting posture.

"Who hit me from behind?" he roared, looking about him savagely.

"I did," the young deadshot replied.

"Yer lie! yer didn't. Some one else done it. I was after you, an' one of your pards lifted me behind ther ear with a club or somethin'."

"Here's what lifted you," the boy said, as he showed his clenched fist. "Just get up and I'll show you just exactly how I did it."

The villain had recovered himself sufficiently to know what was going on now, and he made a grab for his gun.

"Hold on, there!" spoke up Cheyenne Charlie. "You pull that gun an' it will be ther last thing you'll do afore

you drop dead. You started in ter fight Young Wild West with your fists. Now, go ahead an' do it."

"Never mind, Charlie. I reckon I can take care of Big Dan," Wild interrupted. "You just keep quiet. So long as no one else interferes there will be nothing for you to do."

"All right, Wild," came the reply. "Jest as you say."

Big Dan thought better of pulling his gun, but he did not offer to get upon his feet.

Wild waited till what he thought was a reasonable length of time, and then he leaped forward quickly and caught him by the collar of his shirt.

He gave a quick kick and lifted him at the same time, and the result was that the villain got upon his feet with amazing quickness.

"Now, then," said the young deadshot, as he gave him a push and let go his collar, "are you ready to apologize for calling me a liar?"

There was something about the way the boy looked at him that must have told Big Dan that he stood no show with him.

He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, and then he answered, slowly:

"Well, I might have made a mistake. Maybe yer did meet Senor Santo."

"Well, I did meet him, and I shot two of his gang, too, as you will learn later on. But that is not the thing. I said I was going to make you apologize for calling me a liar. Now, then, are you going to do it?"

"Yes, I'm mighty sorry I said that."

"All right, that satisfies me. Now, then, whenever you feel like getting square with me, just say the word. You will find me always ready to fight in any way at all. It makes no difference whether it is a stand-up fight with fists or whether guns and knives are used. You will always find me ready, Big Dan."

"All right, I'll remember that, Young Wild West," and so saying, the defeated ruffian walked away from the place.

A couple of the loungers followed him, no doubt to extend their sympathy. But the rest remained where they were, and looked at the bad man's conqueror in silent admiration.

"Well, this does beat all!" declared the hotelkeeper. "Shake hands, Young Wild West. My name is Bill Riley, an' I've been through ther mill. But I've never seen a man handled that way afore. You sartinly did take ther starch out of Big Dan, an' no mistake. I reckon he'll never forgit you as long as he lives."

"Probably not. But I have an idea he will be looking for revenge before long. If he does, he will get more than he wants, I can tell you."

Wild then told the story of how they had met the four brigands on the mountain trail, after which he asked Bill Riley if he thought there would be any objections if they went into camp a hundred yards down the creek.

"None at all," was the reply. "There ain't no one as has staked claims out in that direction. They all went further up, where there's more dust to be found. You go ahead an' stop anywhere you please. You have got a friend

in me, Young Wild West, so you needn't be afraid that Big Dan will git a gang together an' wipe you out."

"Oh, we are not the least afraid of anything like that happening," and the boy laughed lightly.

After a few more words had been exchanged our friends started down the creek, and finding a place that would just suit them, they came to a halt, and the two Chinamen began unloading the pack-horses.

CHAPTER IV.

READY FOR A GAME OF DRAW POKER.

By the time the camp was put in shape the sun was setting.

The miners could be seen returning from their work, but Young Wild West and his friends remained right where they were.

What they wanted now was their supper, for they all had good appetites, as might be supposed.

Wing Wah, the cook, had started a fire as soon as the tents were erected, while Hop Wah had seen to it that the horses were taken care of and placed where they could nibble at the short grass and drink from the brook when they felt disposed.

The scout's wife assisted the cook in preparing the evening meal, as it was getting rather late, and it was necessary to hurry matters a little.

The result was that it was not long before they were all sitting down to a supper of broiled partridges, venison and baked potatoes, with hot muffins and coffee to help along.

Young Wild West and his friends always lived pretty well, for they saw to it that they carried a good supply of provisions, and as game was generally plentiful where they traveled, they got their share of it, though they never shot any more than they needed.

It was dark by the time supper was finished, and the light from the campfire lit up the surroundings sufficiently to enable them to see the approach of any one.

"Well, boys," said the young deadshot, nodding to his two partners, "I feel just in the humor to smoke a cigar. Suppose we take a walk over to the hotel and buy some?"

"I was jest goin' ter light my pipe, but I reckon a cigar will go all right now," Cheyenne Charlie answered.

"Well, I don't smoke a great deal, but I think I'd enjoy one just now," Jim Dart spoke up. "I reckon the girls will be all right here for awhile."

"Oh, yes," Arietta spoke up. "We are so close to the shanties that I hardly think we need fear any danger. It isn't likely Big Dan will come here to bother us. If he does I think we'll be able to take care of him."

Our hero smiled, for he knew quite well that Arietta was quite capable of taking care of any ruffian who might try to make trouble.

She could shoot as well as the average cowboy, and she was not lacking in courage.

Our hero and his partners had no sooner taken their departure from the camp than Hop Wah sneaked quietly off through the darkness.

Hop was often called Young Wild West's Clever Chinnee, and this was because he was an exception to the general run of his race.

He was, in fact, a very clever magician, and fond of practical joking.

But he had failings, of course, and one of them was that he was a little too fond of whiskey, which he called tangle-foot.

Another was that he was a gambler, and he was never better satisfied than when he was sitting in a game of poker, playing against card sharps, who won their money through cheating.

Hop always had as much as a thousand dollars on his person at one time, and often three times that amount.

It was his intention to go to the hotel, too, for he knew all about the ways of the inhabitants of the mining camps, and if a game of draw poker could not be found there he would be surprised, indeed.

He did not follow the three, but went on around to the rear of the hotel building, and as he entered and made his way to the barroom he was just in time to see Wild and his partners come in by the front door.

There was perhaps a score of rough-looking men gathered there, for they had eaten their supper and had come to the barroom to spend the evening, as they were in the habit of doing.

But there was really no other place for them to go, so it was not strange.

They worked hard during the day, and must have some sort of recreation in the evening.

"There's that heathen galoot, Wild," Cheyenne Charlie said, as he caught sight of Hop as he made his way to the little bar that was situated in one corner of the big room.

"Well, I am not surprised to see him here, Charlie," was the reply. "You know what Hop is, so what is the use of trying to prevent him from having his tanglefoot?"

"There ain't no use, Wild. But jest see how he done it. He waited till we started, an' then he sneaked around in a hurry an' come in by ther back way. Why didn't he come right along with us an' have done with it?"

"Well, if he had done that you wouldn't have had anything to talk about. He knows that, Charlie."

"Yes, I know he does, ther heathen galoot. He thinks himself mighty smart. He's all ther time tryin' ter do somethin' ter make me mad."

"Well, that's all right. You know very well that you think a whole lot of him."

"You kin bet your life I do. But why wouldn't I? Ain't he more than once saved my life? That's what gives him his hold with all of us. He kin do putty near as he pleases, an' we don't feel as though we oughter say anything ag'in him."

"You havee lillee dlink, Misler Charlie?" the Chinaman called out just then, as if he knew he was the subject of the conversation.

"No, you yaller galoot. I don't want ter drink with yer," was the retort.

"Allee light, Misler Charlie. Me no care. Me velly smartee Chinee."

By this time nearly every man in the room was looking at the newcomers.

But when they heard the Chinaman talking so glibly in his pigeon-English, more than one smile could be seen on the faces of the miners.

It happened that Hop and Wing were the first Chinamen to strike Greaser Creek, though the race was common enough to every man there.

"That Chinnee of yours is a mighty good talker, Young Wild West," Bill Riley called out, as he finished waiting on some customers. "He don't seem ter be much like ther ordinary heathens I've seen."

"Well, he isn't, either, Mr. Riley," Wild answered. "Since you have spoken about it, I may as well tell you right now that Hop Wah is a very clever card sharp. Those who hear me will understand by what I say that it isn't safe to play poker with him, because he can cheat without being detected, and that means that he is generally a sure winner every time he plays."

"Whattée mattee, Misler Wild?" Hop asked, in an injured tone of voice as he stepped over closer to our hero.

"Well, never mind, Hop. It seems to me that there are a lot of honest, good-natured men here, and I wanted to warn them not to play poker with you, that's all. If I hear tell of you fleecing any one, unless it is some one who is trying to cheat you, I will make you give back the money you win. Just bear that in mind."

"Allee light, Misler Wild. Me no cheatee. Me velly goodee Chinee."

So saying, the clever Chinnee swallowed the contents of the glass he was holding in his hand at the time, and then smiled blandly at the crowd.

Wild had taken notice the moment he entered that Big Dan was conspicuous by his absence.

"Let's have some cigars, Mr. Riley," he said to the proprietor. "The best you have in the house is none too good for us."

"Well, I've got ther best I kin git for good money, Young Wild West. I hope they'll suit yer. I've got mighty good whiskey, too."

"Well, I never use anything like that, so it makes no difference to me whether it is good or bad."

"Yer don't drink nothin' strong, then?"

"No, and neither does Jim. Charlie takes a drop once in awhile, for his stomach's sake, so he says, though I reckon he would be just as well off without it."

"Well, since you speak about it, I reckon I'll take a little drop now, Wild," and the scout grinned broadly, as though he thought it a good joke.

They all had what they wanted, and Wild paid the bill, not forgetting to ask the proprietor to take something himself.

Hop came in for the round, too, for he had a way of never getting left, when the least chance afforded to drop in.

What Wild had said about the Chinaman playing poker had created no little interest among the miners present.

As was usually the case, nearly all of them had a fondness for gambling.

In spite of the warning they had received, three of them got together at one side of the room, and after no little whispering, they went to a table and sat down, at the same time calling out to the landlord to fetch them a new pack of cards.

"We're goin' to have a little game for an hour or two,

an' any one is welcome ter join in, even if it's ther smart Chinee," one of them said, by way of a challenge.

Wild said nothing to this, for he knew it would be useless to do so.

Hop looked at him, questioningly, but the boy turned his head, so taking it for granted that he would be permitted to take a hand in the game, the clever Chinnee walked slowly to the table, and, pulling up a chair, sat down.

"Me likee play um fivee-handee gamee, so be," he said.

At this juncture a man crawled through a window near at hand and stepped rather timidly toward the table.

It was Big Dan.

"If nobody ain't got any objections, I'd like ter take a hand in this game," he said, looking at Young Wild West and his partners as though he expected they might have something to say against him.

"Hello, Big Dan!" our hero called out, as he stepped toward him. "What's that you just said?"

"It's all right, Young Wild West. You licked me fair an' square, an' I ain't got nothin' ag'in yer. I jest said that if no one objected I would like ter play in this here game of poker."

"Well, if you can't play poker any better than you can fight you had better not take a hand in it."

"That's all right. I never learned how to fight with my fists, but I reckon I've learned how ter play poker."

"All right, then. Go ahead. I won't interfere with you unless you take a notion to shoot the Chinaman or do something rash."

"I ain't goin' ter take a notion ter shoot nobody. I ain't that sort of a man, I ain't."

Some of the bystanders laughed at this, which told plainly what they thought of the bad man who had been bullying every one about previous to this time.

But Big Dan swallowed his wrath, if he had any just then, and took it good-naturedly.

He seemed very anxious to play cards, so he pulled up his chair and made the fifth one at the table.

Our hero and his partners had watched Hop so many times when he sat in a poker game that it was hardly of any interest to them now.

But since they knew he could deceive about any one he met in that kind of a game, they watched to see what would happen now.

Of course, it would be the same old thing.

Hop would get all the money if the game went far enough.

Bill Riley produced a new pack of cards and brought forth a big pile of chips that were red, white and blue in color.

"I'm ther banker," he said, "an' every time a pot is won a blue chip goes into ther kitty. I ain't furnishin' cards an' tables an' chairs for my health, yer know. Ther blue chips is a dollar apiece. Ther red ones is five dollars, an' ther white ones is twenty-five cents. That's ther only way we play here, an' ther rules of ther house has got to be abided by."

"Allee light, Misler Liley," Hop answered, blandly, for he remembered the man's name quite well, since he had heard him tell it to Wild. "Me takee fivee hundled dollee worth of um chips, so be."

"Whew!" exclaimed one of the miners, half rising and looking at the Chinaman in amazement. "What do yer think this game is goin' ter be? We jest set down here ter pass ther time away. We don't expect ter git 'way up in ther hundreds. Ther way we generally play is that each man buys about fifty dollars' worth of chips, and then make a freeze-out of it. As soon as a man loses his chips he drops out of ther game, an' so on until there's only two left. Of course, one is apt ter git all ther money by playin' that way, but it makes ther game last a long time, an' gives them what drops out a chance ter start another game at another table."

"Allee light. Me buy um huddled dollee worth of um chips, len."

"Well, I'll go a hundred, but it's goin' ter be a game of freeze-out, understand."

"Allee light. Anythling suitee me. Me allee samee likee um Melican sportee. Hip hi! hoolay! Me um bully boy with us glasse eye."

The rest were satisfied to purchase a hundred dollars' worth of chips, so they all did so.

Bill Riley was satisfied, too, for he knew he would make ten or fifteen per cent. in the game, if not a great deal more.

The cards were shuffled, and just as the cut for deal was half made a rather roughly attired man, conspicuous in a slouch hat and black beard, entered the place.

He looked sharply around the room and then approached the card-table.

"Can't we make a-dis a six-handed game, senors?" he asked.

Young Wild West gave a start. He had heard that voice before, so he stepped up a little closer and looked the stranger squarely in the face.

"You want to play, too, senor?" came the query.

"No," was the reply. "I don't care about it just now. But I reckon they will take you in the game."

"He's welcome, of course," Big Dan spoke up, looking at our hero as though he felt uneasy about something.

Hop was, of course, agreeable, so the rest nodded assent, and the stranger promptly sat down.

"Boys," said our hero, as he stepped back to his partners, "if I am not mistaken, that fellow is Senor Santo. Now you just wait. Something will happen before he leaves here, and you can bet on it."

CHAPTER V.

SENOR SANTO SHOWS HIS BOLDNESS.

Senor Santo and his man Gonzales felt much relieved when they were permitted to go on their way.

The brigand leader would no doubt have liked very much to have shot the dashing young fellow who had baffled him when he got to a safe place behind the rocks.

But he was altogether too thoughtful to do a thing like that, for he knew it would surely mean his own death before he could make his escape.

So he contented himself with riding along straight for his rendezvous, which, as our friends had supposed, was but a short distance from the trail.

It was quite a secure headquarters the brigands had

formed, since it was located in a cave that would be difficult to discover by any one, no matter how persistent they might be in searching for it.

The entrance to the cave was from a narrow pass, where the rocks ran up perpendicular on either side.

The mouth of this was not more than six feet in width, and but one horseman could ride through at a time.

Here it was that a flat piece of rock had been arranged so it could be dropped down from the inside by simply moving a long, stout stick which acted as a lever in placing the stone door in position again.

Sometimes this was left open all day long, and the two brigands found it so when they reached it now.

Senor Santo rode through first, and as soon as Gonzales had followed he dismounted and ran to the lever to raise the rock so that the mouth of the narrow pass could be effectually hidden.

There was no way to track them there, since for a distance of two or three hundred yards there was nothing but rock to ride or walk upon.

"That is right, Gonzales," said the leader, speaking in his own tongue as he nodded his approval to what his man did. "We must not give them a chance to trace us here. Not that I think we have been followed, but just as a precaution, that is all."

Gonzales nodded, and after leaving the horses with the bodies of the two men who had been shot, inside, he hastened to close the entrance of the cave.

Then he took his own horse by the bridle and walked along through the pass until the mouth of the cave was reached.

It was a rather wide mouth, and the natural ceiling was amply high enough to permit Senor Santo to ride on inside.

Once there, he dismounted, and then two or three rascally looking greasers came from an inner cave and greeted him with cries of welcome, while they bowed as though he were a member of a royal family.

"Well, my brave men, did you succeed?" the villain asked.

"Yes," came the reply. "We have gathered in some bags of gold-dust to the value of several thousands of dollars."

"Good! I am glad you had such luck. Was there any fighting done?"

"No, Senor Santo. We took them by surprise."

"I am glad to hear that. You had much better luck than we had. We are two less in number now."

This declaration surprised those who had come out to meet the leader, and there was a rush from the inner cave, and more came, making the number all told about fifteen.

Turning his horse over to the Mexican who had been lucky enough to escape with him, he walked back into the living quarters of the band.

Once here he threw off his fancy coat and hat and took a seat upon the best chair the place afforded.

No questions were asked, but all save Gonzales, who was attending to the two horses, stood around him, expectantly.

"Boys," said the leader, as he calmly proceeded to roll a cigarette, "when Gonzales comes in he will tell you all about it. I would rather he would do it, for it would pain me to relate the humiliation and defeat I met with but a short time ago."

Then a rush was made outside, and while the brigands plied Gonzales with questions, Senor Santo calmly puffed away at his cigarette.

In a few minutes they all returned to the cave, followed by Gonzales.

It was not until then that the leader looked the men over carefully.

"Where is Pedro?" he asked, suddenly. "Did he not come to tell you that you were needed?"

"He has not been here since he left this afternoon with Gonzales and the others," one of them replied.

"That is strange," and the brigand leader shrugged his shoulders and looked slightly uneasy. "Something must have happened to him. I was in hopes that we would meet you all coming along the trail. If we had there would have been a fight, for those who captured us are skilled in the art. They are very crafty, too, or they never would have got the best of us the way they did."

"Gonzales has told us all. It was the doings of a young American, so he says."

"Yes, he was responsible for it all. He has told you that this boy is called Young Wild West?"

"Yes, and it is not the first time we have heard of him, as you know, Senor Santo."

"Oh, no. The fame of the American boy has spread all over this part of the country. He is counted as being the champion deadshot of his country. He certainly can shoot, as my wounded wrist will tell."

He held up his bandaged wrist, for he had bound it with his handkerchief long before this, and then he scowled.

"The wound is nothing," he went on, shaking his head. "But it hurt me to think that I could have a revolver shot from my hand in that way. And just at the very time when I thought I was going to have everything as I wanted it. But Gonzales told you that I gave my promise not to interfere with Young Wild West or his friends again, did he not?"

"Yes, Senor Santo."

"Well, you know how much that promise amounts to, of course."

The villain laughed lightly.

"We understand, senor."

"It amounts to nothing more than the blowing of the wind," the leader resumed. "Sometimes it is necessary to make promises you don't intend to keep. It surely was necessary when I did it a little while ago. I suppose Young Wild West has gone on to Greaser Creek, as the American dogs have named the mining camp. If he has I expect to see him there to-night, for I intend to go to the camp."

"Will it not be a great risk, Senor Santo?" one of his men asked, gravely. "You say this American boy is far more clever than the most of his race. Would he not be apt to recognize you, even though you may disguise yourself well?"

"I will take the chances on that. Leave it to me."

The man who seemed to have his doubts about it said no more.

"I would like to have something to eat presently. Give me the best our larder affords. A little wine right now, too."

Two of the men flew to do his bidding, which told plainly how well he had them disciplined.

The wine was brought, and while Senor Santo was tasting it a noise in the outer cave told them that some one had arrived.

The man who usually attended to the entrance when it was closed, ran out and, quickly returning again, reported that Pedro had arrived, and that his horse was so lame that he had been compelled to lead it a long way.

"Ah! that explains it," Senor Santo said. "Now I know why he failed to get here and tell you how much you were needed."

Pedro soon came in, and he looked much surprised at seeing his leader there.

"You didn't wait, Senor Santo?" he said, bowing to the brigand chief.

"No, Pedro. I was not allowed to wait."

"Not allowed?"

"No. Much as I hate to say it, I was captured, and humiliated greatly. But ask Gonzales. He will tell you all about it."

Gonzales was there ready to give the information, and when he had learned how it was that the two had arrived at the headquarters ahead of him, Pedro shook his head and exclaimed:

"This is the first time you were ever defeated, Senor Santo! It pains me sorely to hear this. We have lost two men, too, which is bad for us."

"Well, we are not going to cry over it, Pedro. Don't fear but that we will have our revenge. But what delayed you?"

"Oh, I have not told you yet. When I was less than half a mile from where I left you, my horse stumbled and fell. It took me a long time to get him on his feet again, and at first I thought his right leg was broken. When I did get him up I found he was so lame that I could not ride him, so I have been forced to walk all the way, and lead him along at a very slow pace. I was off the trail at the time, for I started to make a short cut here. It seems that you got here ahead of me."

"Yes, that is indeed true. Well, you did the best you could, so I am not holding you to blame. If you had remained, I suppose you would have been made a prisoner, too, and we would all be here now just the same, for Young Wild West did not seem to care about keeping us prisoners. This was, no doubt, due to the fact that he was not aware that he was so close to the mining camp. But even if he had taken us there I would have found a way to escape."

"It is much better the way it has turned out, though," Pedro declared, shaking his head.

"Probably it is."

The first portion of the supper that was being prepared for him was now brought to the table that was near where the brigand chief was sitting.

He threw away his cigarette and was soon busily occupied in devouring the meal.

Senor Santo had a good cook, and the larder afforded the best to be had in the line of eatables.

It took him fully half an hour to dispose of the different courses that were brought to him, and when he had finished he swallowed a cup of wine and declared that he now

felt fit to meet Young Wild West or any one else living, either in battle or at a game where wits played a part.

"Will any one accompany you, Senor Santo?" Gonzales asked.

"You and Pedro can go, if you like," was the reply. "But you must remain in hiding and not show yourself to any of the Americans there. I am going to the hotel and act as a total stranger. I will take the poorest horse we have here and make it appear that I am a prospector who has roughed it. I can do that easily, for the disguises I have are many."

He retired to a corner of the cave, across which was spread a curtain of skins, and after lighting an old lamp he went ahead with his preparations for disguising himself.

First of all he donned a well-worn suit of clothes that did not fit him over well.

Then he brought forth a false beard that was almost jet black.

The hair was sewed tightly to a smooth skin that just fit his face nicely.

But not satisfied with tying it on at the top of his head before placing the wig there that matched the beard, Senor Santo opened a bottle of glue or some other adhesive substance and plastered it over the skin.

This done, he fitted the beard and it dried almost instantly.

"This is the first time I have ever taken such a precaution," he muttered, "but in case any one suspects that the beard is false, they will be unable to tear it from my face. It will be easy for me to remove it by applying some warm water to it when I get back. Young Wild West is not going to penetrate my disguise, I am certain."

When he finally threw aside the curtain and stepped forth, a murmur of admiration went up from his waiting men.

They all declared that they would never know who he was, if they had met him by chance anywhere.

The cave was lighted by lanterns now, for it had grown so dark that it was no longer possible for them to see well.

During the day the light was admitted through a rather wide opening at the rear of the cave, which was very close to the high wall of a cliff.

Light still came in, but it was growing darker all the time, and hence the lanterns had been brought into use.

The senor surveyed himself several times in a big mirror, and then satisfied that his disguise was perfect, he told the two who were to accompany him to get the horses ready, and to be sure and select the poorest one they had for his own use.

"See to it that part of a prospector's outfit is fastened to the saddle," he advised.

It took quite some little time to get this done to his satisfaction, and by that time it was totally dark, and the stars were shining brightly overhead when the three sallied forth from the cave.

There was more than one way of getting to the regular trail, and taking the shortest one, the disguised brigand chief rode on, followed by his two men.

The distance to the mining camp not being great, they were not long in descending into the valley and reaching its outskirts.

"Now, then, my brave men," said Senor Santo, nodding to his companions, "you will get as close as you think it advisable to the hotel. I want you to do this because there may be a chance of my getting into trouble, and in that case I would surely want your assistance. But I hardly believe anything of the kind will happen, for my disguise is too good for that."

"They will never know you, senor," declared Pedro.

"Certainly not," Gonzales added.

"I believe you are both right in that. Well, I will ride on up to the hotel."

The horse he rode limped slightly and acted very much as though it was tired out.

There was no one outside the shanty hotel at the time, since there was too much going on inside to attract their attention.

The villainous brigand dismounted and paused before a window.

When he saw that a game of cards was about to begin and that one of the players was a Chinaman, he decided to get into the game, for he was a lover of gambling.

Of course, he guessed that the Chinaman belonged to Young Wild West's party, and this made him all the more eager to join the players.

Then, as has already been described, he walked in and asked if he could become a party to the game of draw poker.

Senor Santo was prepared to be scrutinized, but when he saw Young Wild West step forward and eye him sharply he felt rather uneasy.

However, he acted his part well, and when he sat down at the table he was satisfied that the boy, even though he might have his suspicions, had not recognized him.

"Some chips, landlord," the brigand called out. "Me verra hungry, but me rather take my chance in a game of poker than eat."

He had adopted the broken way of speaking that Mexicans who have learned English pretty well use so much, but had failed to change his voice.

Big Dan took it on himself to explain what kind of a game it was, and the senor was satisfied, so he purchased a hundred dollars' worth of chips, and then joined in the cut for deal.

As luck would have it, he won.

Then the six-handed game of draw poker began.

It was a "hundred-dollar freeze-out," and if the playing continued long enough one man would have all the money, less that which went to the landlord.

CHAPTER VI.

HOP "FREEZES OUT" THE GAMBLERS.

Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart had been watching the stranger closely since Wild told them of his suspicions.

The chances are that they would never have thought it was Senor Santo in disguise, if the young deadshot had not spoken of it.

Then the more they watched him the more they became convinced that Wild was right.

Though the man spoke in a slightly broken way, and his beard looked to be quite real, the scout and Dart felt that

Wild never made a mistake, and they decided that it must be the leader of the brigands who had been bold enough to come to the hotel and join in the game of poker.

The game started off with Big Dan winning the first pot, which amounted to about ten dollars.

No one seemed to have much of a hand, and there was little betting.

The bad man sat on the left of the disguised villain, and as he picked up the cards to shuffle them there was a confident smile on his face.

Big Dan prided himself on being very slick with a pack of cards, and he had made up his mind that he would show Young Wild West that no matter how clever the Chinaman was, he would get the best of him.

Meanwhile, Hop had been silent. He had watched everything that took place and had made a small bet, but had not ventured to say anything.

He knew quite well that the stranger had done his best to stack the cards, but had failed through a little mistake he made.

Big Dan was having better luck, for Hop could see him getting certain cards together, and fixing them in the pack so their edges protruded just enough for him to know where they were.

This is a common trick among gamblers, and explains why they so often can deal the cards as they want to.

Hop, who sat next to the dealer, waited until the five cards lay before him, before he picked them up.

When he looked at them he was not at all surprised to find that he had three kings and two other cards of a different suit.

He had put up an ante of one dollar, so it was natural that he would draw two cards.

The rest all came in, and then looking at the Chinaman, Big Dan said:

"Well, heathen, how many cards do yer want?"

"Me takee two, so be."

"All right, here yer are."

The two cards the Chinaman received did not come from the top of the pack, but he said nothing.

Big Dan had done it cleverly, and it was not for Hop to denounce any one for cheating, since he intended to do a little in that line himself before he got through with them.

One of the two cards he received was a king, making him hold four kings.

But four aces will beat four kings any time, and as straights and flushes were not played much in that part of the country at the time of which we write, four aces was the best possible hand to hold.

Hop was satisfied that Big Dan was after him, and that he would hold four aces.

He could not help thinking any other way, since he very often did the same thing himself.

But Big Dan was not after Hop alone, for he gave the miner next to the Chinaman four aces, and the one next to him a full house.

This was as far as he could go, since he had had no time to fix the cards any further than to arrange it so he would get the four aces on a four-card draw.

The disguised brigand chief was now quite at his ease,

and he played just as though he had long been acquainted with those about the table.

"Three cards for me," he said, as the dealer looked at him, questioningly, when it came his turn.

He held a pair of deuces, but as the draw did not benefit him any he threw down his hand.

"Well, let me see," said Big Dan, as though he had not yet decided how many cards to draw. "I reckon I'll keep this one an' take four."

He threw four of the cards upon the table and then picked up the pack and slipped four from it close to the top.

By constantly moving his thumb back and forward he managed to make it appear that they were dealt from the top.

But Hop saw it, whether any of the rest did or not.

Anyhow, nothing was said, and Big Dan had stolen his four aces all right.

It was Hop's first bet, and when he pushed a red chip to the center of the table the dealer was greatly pleased, for it represented five dollars, and it would not take many such bets to lessen the Chinaman's pile.

The next man, who also held four of a kind, raised it five, and the third did the same thing.

The other dropped out, so Dan pushed up the necessary amount of chips and raised it ten.

Hop knew he stood no chance of winning, even though he held four kings, so he wisely dropped out.

But not so with the two miners.

They each raised it five, and then Big Dan made it ten better.

"It looks as though this is goin' ter be a show-down," observed the miner, who held the four tens, with a grin. "But I'm ready ter git out of ther game at any time, so here she goes."

He pushed up all the chips he had, and the other miner did likewise.

Big Dan was compelled to call them, of course, and when they showed their hands he grinned and threw down his four aces.

"We oughter have knowed better, anyhow," declared one of the losers. "Dan is always too much for us in a poker game."

"Well, I play a square game, boys," declared the winner, as he scooped in the chips.

"Velly muchee square, so be," Hop spoke up, smiling blandly.

"I reckon you know, heathen," and Big Dan grinned.

"Lat light, me knowee velly muchee, so be."

"It's your deal, Senor Chineese," said Santo, nodding to Hop.

"Allee light, Mislser Gleaser, me dealee velly muchee quicke."

"Me no greaser," retorted the brigand, affecting anger, though he did not care what the Chinaman called him just then.

"Allee light. Whattee you name, len?"

"My name Jose."

"Allee light, Mislser Jose."

While Hop was talking he was fixing the cards, and he

kept on shuffling until he got them the way he wanted them.

Then he permitted Big Dan to cut them, after which he proceeded to deal.

Two of the miners were out of the game, so it had settled down to but four players now.

It really looked as though the game of "freeze-out" was not going to last as long as some of them had thought at the start.

The two miners sat there, however, for they were much interested, and no doubt wanted to see who was going to be the boss.

Hop dealt each of the players three of a kind, taking care to get the three aces for himself.

A dollar chip was the ante, and when they all came in he proceeded to give out the number of cards as fast as they were called for.

Each of them drew two, and succeeded in getting the fourth card they wanted.

But Hop had the cards fixed so they were right on the top now, and when he threw away two cards and said he would take two, he lifted them from the top of the pack as it lay upon the table, so there was no room for the least doubt that he was honest about it.

It was Senor Santo who possessed the four kings, while Big Dan held four queens.

The other two had jacks and tens, respectively.

Though they had all been told, with the exception of the brigand chief, that Hop was a card sharp, the gamblers did not heed the warning.

The betting started up and kept going higher.

Every time Hop made a raise he would study his hand carefully for a moment and then act as though he was taking a risk.

When Big Dan found that Hop's chips were nearly exhausted, he decided to make it a show-down as far as the Chinaman was concerned.

This was done, and then Hop threw down his hand and said:

"Me gottee four lillie aces, so be. Me takee um pot. Me velly smartee Chineee."

"Verra smart Chineee," declared Santo, nodding and smiling in a peculiar way.

"Well, I'm satisfied," Big Dan declared, while the other player shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

The next man to deal did his level best to cheat, but made a miserable failure of it, and the result was that he lost all the chips he had on three queens.

The game now settled down to Hop, Senor Santo and Big Dan.

Wild, who had been watching the game closely, now took a walk outside.

He found the stranger's horse standing there, and when he stepped up and made an examination of the animal he decided that it had not been ridden very far.

The young deadshot had planned to give the stranger a surprise, but he wanted to wait until he became incensed at the Chinaman for winning his money.

He walked inside and joined his partners again, and became interested in the game.

There was quite a little betting done in this hand, but

when Hop won the money with four aces, Senor Santo's hundred dollars' worth of chips had dwindled down to less than ten, while Big Dan's pile had diminished greatly.

The brigand chief had lost on a full hand, but as he picked the cards up to deal he thought he had the four aces Hop had held right where he wanted them.

But he was much mistaken, for Hop had managed to slip them up his sleeve, and the deck of cards was minus four.

Santo let some of the cards fall upon the floor, as though it was an accident, and picking them up he looked for the aces.

But not coming across any of them, he contented himself with gathering the kings together again, and as he straightened up the deck he had them fixed so he would be sure to deal them to himself.

Big Dan grinned while all this was going on, for he knew pretty well what the man was up to.

Hop did not get a pair this time, but he changed four of the cards for the aces he held in his sleeve, determined to win with four aces for the third time.

Big Dan got a full hand this time, which was enough for him to bet on until he had gone to the extent of thirty dollars.

Hop kept on raising it, for he now had plenty of chips at his command.

Santo looked at him curiously, but he must have thought there was a chance for him, for he put up his last chip and called for a show-down.

"Whattée you gottee?" Hop asked.

"Four kings," was the reply.

"Lat velly stlange. You havee four kings lillie while ago, and me havee four aces lillie while ago. You gottee four kings now, and me gottee four lillie aces now."

"This is about ther rankest cheatin' game I ever set into," declared Big Dan, angrily. "You fellers does nothin' but steal ther cards every time you git hold of 'em. Why can't yer play honest?"

"Lat allee light, my fliend," Hop answered, blandly. "You pletty goodee cheatee, so be. Me no cheatee. Me velly honest when me play dlaw pokie."

"Yes, I reckon yer are. But it's my deal now. It's up ter me an' you to finish ther game. We'll see who's ther best man."

Hop let him have all the cards, and it was well that he did so, for Big Dan took the trouble to count them.

"Ther pack's all right," he declared. "Now, then, watch me, heathen, an' if you ketch me cheatin', don't be afraid ter tell me. I'm goin' ter play a square game with yer."

"Allee light," was the reply.

But the bad man did not play a square game, and Hop could easily see it.

He dealt the Chinaman three tens and a pair of aces, cold, and took care to get three kings and the other two aces for himself.

The result was that after he had raised it ten dollars on the second bet, Hop called him and lost.

"Now, len," said the clever Chineee, with a child-like smile, as he picked up the cards, "me havee lillie dealee. You watchee me, my fliend."

"You don't have ter tell me ter do that, heathen. Go ahead."

Hop gave the cards a slight shuffle, and then after the cut had been made, he dealt them quickly until each had the required five.

Big Dan picked up his cards, satisfied that they had been dealt squarely this time.

When he found he held three aces he took it for granted that it was mere luck.

"Give me two cards, heathen," he said, as he made the discard.

"Allee light," and Hop quickly did so.

Dan was a little disappointed when he found he had not drawn the other ace, but as a pair of sevens came instead, he felt that he might have the winning hand.

But Hop was not figuring that way. He knew exactly what cards his opponent held, so he fixed himself with four deuces.

It was now that the acting part in the game of poker came into play.

Hop could not be beaten at this, and every time he raised it he acted very much as though he was taking a big chance.

He kept on in this way until he managed to force his opponent to put up all his chips.

Then came the show-down.

"Whattie you got, so be?" Hop asked, as though he was afraid he was going to lose.

"Three aces and a pair of sevens, heathen. If you beat that, I'm done."

"Me beatee lat, allee light!" exclaimed the Chinaman, jubilantly. "Me gottee four biggee deuces."

"Blamed if yer ain't!" exclaimed the bad man, disgustedly. "Well, you're ther winner."

Then it was that Santo arose from the table and looking at Big Dan as though he was surprised, he said:

"You let da Chinees take all your money that way?"

"Well, I don't know what I'm goin' ter do about it, stranger," the bad man answered.

"He a cheat. He steal da cards."

"You allee samee lie if you say me cheatee!" exclaimed Hop, boldly, as he arose and quickly pulled a big, old-fashioned six-shooter from under his blouse. "You allee samee cheatee, and me see you plenty timee. Now, len, you takee lat back, or me puttee hole through you allee samee likee Young Wild West."

What had happened just suited Wild, and before anything further could be said or done, he stepped over and seized the stranger by the beard.

He gave a sharp pull upon it, but it would not come off, and then it struck him very forcibly that he had made a mistake in his man.

"Stop a-dat!" cried Santo, angrily, and playing his part to perfection. "What you a-pull my whiskers for, boy?"

"That's all right," Wild answered, in his cool and easy way. "When a cheat accuses another of being dishonest in a game of cards he ought to have his whiskers pulled. Now you just take it easy, do you hear?"

"Me lose a hundred dollar," Santo answered, affecting an injured air.

"That's all right if you did. You did your best to win,

and you used all the thieving methods you knew. But you failed, and our clever Chinees has won out. I am going to make him give back the money he took from three of the players. But as far as you and Big Dan are concerned, you have got to lose your money. You are both cheats, and you are not half as clever about it as you think you are. I have been watching you, and I know pretty well what I am talking about."

"You talk too much, boy. You t'ink because plenty Americans here you can make me 'fraid. But me no 'fraid."

Wild was not a little puzzled. The voice of the man sounded so much like that of Senor Santo's that he could not make himself believe that he had made a mistake.

But the fact that the beard seemed real, and Senor Santo had been without a beard when he met him that afternoon, caused him to feel that he must be wrong in his conclusions.

He did not want to have trouble with the Mexican, so he stepped back and said no more just then.

Satisfied that he had escaped detection, the brigand chief was bent upon getting his revenge upon the boy who had baffled him so completely that afternoon.

"Me fight da American boy if me have a fair show," he declared, stepping to the center of the floor.

"Do you want to fight me?" Wild asked, an angry flush showing in his eyes for a moment.

"Yes, me no 'fraid of you."

"Well, how do you want to fight?"

Santo, who was an expert with a dagger knife, quickly drew a keen-edged blade from his belt and held it before our hero's eyes.

"You would like to stick that thing between my ribs, I suppose."

Wild was now as cool as ever, and there was a smile upon his handsome face as he spoke.

"Me fight if me have a fair show," was the declaration.

"All right, I reckon you'll have a fair show, all right, Mr. Greaser. But before we start in I want to tell you that I am not going to hurt you. I am just going to show you that you don't know how to handle that sticker you have in your hand."

Then the boy coolly drew his hunting-knife and motioned for the crowd to get back out of the way.

A table was moved so they would have plenty of room, and then the two faced each other, ready for the fray.

CHAPTER VII.

A DUEL WITH KNIVES.

Somehow, Young Wild West could not get it out of his head that it was really Senor Santo, the leader of the Brigands of the Border, who was standing before him.

The eyes were the same and the face was exactly like the one he remembered so well.

But the short black beard was the puzzling thing about it all.

He had given it a smart jerk when he caught hold of the beard, and he had felt the skin and flesh give with it.

He was bound to satisfy himself, however, so as he stood facing the man, knife in hand, our hero said:

"See here, Mr. Greaser, I just told you that I didn't

mean to kill you. I am going to show you that you don't know how to fight, and after I have done so I will spare your life on one condition."

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the brigand chief, who really felt that he would be able to vanquish his youthful opponent in a duel with knives.

"You can laugh now, but you won't have the heart to do it when I am through with you," the boy went on. "Now the condition is that after I have beaten you you must allow your beard to be shaved from your face. I think you would look a great deal better without it. You remind me very much of a man I once met, but his was a smooth face, and I want to see how much you resemble him. Now, then, do you agree to the terms I offer?"

"If da American boy beat me I will get shaved," Santo declared, nodding to the crowd. "Me want to get shaved, anyhow, but me see da game of poker, and me like to play. Me want to get my supper, too, but me like to gamble better. If da American boy beat me, fetch da barber right away and I get shaved. Maybe dat please him verra much."

He laughed again, and there was such a confident way about him that our hero felt that he had no mean foe to tackle.

"Say when you are ready, greaser," he called out.

"Me ready now."

"All right, then, come on."

The lithe form of the young deadshot sprang forward, and the blades met, the sparks flying from them as they clashed over their heads.

Wild had no intention whatever of doing the least harm to the man, for he felt that he might be mistaken, after all.

But he was going to disarm him, and that as quickly as possible.

Again the blades clashed, and the two sprang about, dodging and feinting.

It was a very pretty fight, if one liked to see such things, for the two appeared to be about evenly matched.

Senor Santo possessed surprising agility, but he was a young man and no doubt pretty well trained.

Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart stood looking on with confidence.

So many times had they seen their dashing young leader fight such duels that they never once doubted that he would be the winner now.

His coolness, coupled with his skill, would surely bring him through the victor.

Back and forth the duelists swayed, while they kept feinting and striking.

But no blood was drawn, and when two minutes had elapsed the crowd was all but spellbound.

Big Dan had taken his place near the door, and he watched the conflict eagerly.

No doubt he was anxious to see Young Wild West go down.

Wild kept playing with him, acting on the defensive the biggest part of the time, until at last he found out the Mexican's weak points.

Then he started in on the aggressive, and when Senor Santo found himself doing his best to keep from receiving

a knife thrust, his face paled slightly and a murmur of admiration went up from the crowd.

It was plain that nearly every man there favored the young deadshot, and wanted to see him win.

Having got the advantage, Wild kept him on the defensive, and around the room they went.

Once Santo dropped suddenly and made a thrust that came near reaching our hero's body.

But a miss is as good as a mile, as the old saying goes, and Wild made up for it by making an upward stroke, which sent the knife flying from the Mexican's hand.

It fell to the floor with a ring, and Wild stood over him with uplifted knife.

"I've got you, greaser," he said, coolly. "Now, then, are you satisfied you don't know how to fight?"

"You got a-me, boy," came the reply, in a voice that trembled slightly. "Kill me."

"Oh, no, I am not going to do that. I want to see your beard shaved from your face."

"All a-right. You get da barber. But me want to eat first."

"Ther best you kin git now, greaser, is a cup of coffee an' a sandwich," spoke up Bill Riley, the proprietor of the hotel.

"All a-right."

Then, with remarkable coolness, the disguised brigand chief went to a table and sat down.

"Three cheers for Young Wild West!" shouted one of the miners, and then a cheer went up that made the shanty hotel fairly tremble.

"That's all right, gentlemen," said the young deadshot, as he stepped over and picked up the Mexican's knife.

"I was certain that I could get the best of him, and that's why I tackled him. One of you just go and find the barber of the camp."

"We ain't got no regular barber here," a miner answered. "But there's two or three as does ther shavin' for ther boys. Here's Joe Budd, right here. I don't know whether he's got his razor with him or not, but it won't take him long ter git it."

"I ain't got my razor here, but I'll run an' git it right away, Young Wild West," a man spoke up, as he stepped out into view.

"All right, do so. I have reasons for wanting to see the beard off this man's face."

Senor Santo was now in anything but an easy frame of mind.

But he made out that he was perfectly indifferent, and leaned his head upon his hand as he waited for the sandwich and cup of coffee.

Riley had given the order for it, and in a few minutes it was brought.

But at the same moment Joe Budd came back with his razor and shaving-mug and brush.

Santo took a sip of the coffee, and then, as quick as lightning, he threw the cup at our hero, who was standing but a short distance from the table.

Wild was quick enough to dodge it, but before he could recover himself the villain had turned and leaped through the open window, which was almost directly behind him.

His horse was right there, and leaping into the saddle,

he went galloping away, at the same time uttering a defiant shout.

Cheyenne Charlie was the first to get outside, and as everyone seemed bent on getting there, the doorway was blocked for a moment.

Wild leaped through the window, but found himself too late to catch the villain.

He heard the sounds of receding hoofs, and shaking his head, he faced the excited miners and called out:

"Gentlemen, that fellow was Senor Santo, the leader of the Brigands of the Border."

"What!" cried Bill Riley. "Do yer mean that, Young Wild West?"

"I certainly do. I never make a mistake when I meet a man in disguise whom I have met before. That beard he wore was not his own, but it was fastened to his face so securely that it would not move when I pulled upon it. Now you know why I wanted to have him shaved."

Probably there was only one man there, outside of our friends, who was not surprised at the young deadshot's declaration.

This was Big Dan, who had known right along that it was the brigand chief.

The fact was that Big Dan was in league with the brigands and that he made considerable money from the alliance.

It was he who kept Senor Santo posted as to what time the successful miners would leave the camp with their gold dust.

But there was no occasion for him to act a part just now.

All he had to do was to listen to what was said, and he did so with no little interest.

But he felt it his duty to go and report to Senor Santo as soon as possible, so after waiting a few minutes, until the excitement had somewhat subsided, he left the hotel and got his horse, which was tied in a little shed back of the shanty he occupied.

But Young Wild West had been suspicious of Big Dan right along.

He had noticed that the bad man had been the first to propose to take the stranger into the game.

Seeing that he left the place so soon after the brigand's flight, he thought it would be a good idea to follow him.

"Boys," said he to his partners, "I am going to see what Big Dan is up to. I am satisfied that he is going away from the camp. You stay here for a while. I will go and get my horse and follow him."

The boy acted quickly, and he was upon the back of his sorrel stallion just as Big Dan started to ride out of the valley.

Wild heard the hoofbeats, so he kept right after him, taking care not to get too close.

He kept his ears open, and whenever he found the man ahead of him was going slowly, he did the same.

In this way the valley was left behind, and they were riding over the trail.

If the bad man had thought there was any danger of his being followed he might have kept a watch behind, but he did not.

He rode right on, and when he came to the place where

he must turn from the trail in order to reach the cave of the brigands, he went right ahead.

Big Dan had never been inside the cave.

Several times he had come there for the purpose of giving Senor Santo information, but he must stop at a certain point and give a signal.

Then it would not be long before the brigand leader would appear, though from just where, Big Dan did not know.

As dark as it was he had no trouble in finding the spot, and once there he came to a halt and dismounted.

Then he gave a low whistle and waited.

By this time Wild had dismounted and had crept up to within a few yards of where the villain was standing by his horse.

Well satisfied that he was to again meet Senor Santo face to face, Wild waited for developments.

There was no answer to Big Dan's whistle, and after waiting for fully two minutes he gave the signal again, this time a little louder.

Then a thud sounded, as though two stones had come together forcibly, and footsteps were heard.

"Hello!" said the bad man, softly.

"Hello!" came the reply, in a low tone of voice. "Is it you, Senor Dan?"

"That's right, Senor Santo. I'm here."

"What brings you here so soon after what happened in the mining camp?"

Then Wild saw the brigand leader step forth into the starlight.

The black beard was still on his face, but the young deadshot was not surprised at this, since he had hardly had time to remove it.

"I thought I'd better come over an' let yer know that Young Wild West knowed who yer was all ther time."

"Senor Dan," retorted the brigand chief, impatiently, "it was not necessary for you to come and tell me that. I knew that before we started to fight in the barroom."

"Yer did!" and Big Dan seemed greatly surprised.

"Certainly. The moment he demanded that if he spared my life I was to permit my beard to be shaved from my face, I knew it. But I suspected all along that he was watching me, and had his suspicions as to who I was."

"Thunder! I didn't know that. But, anyhow, when he found you had got away, Young Wild West told all hands that you was Senor Santo."

"Well, that's all right. He told the crowd about it, but he didn't catch me. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Well, I hope I didn't make yer mad by comin' here," and Dan shrugged his shoulders uneasily.

"Oh, no, Senor Dan. Since you have taken the trouble to come here, thinking you were doing me a favor, I will take you inside and make you a member of our band. You have asked me to do this several times, but I never thought well of it until now. I am satisfied that you are a man who can be trusted, even though you are an American, and all the members of my band are Mexicans. What say you? Do you wish to join the Brigands of the Border?"

"I sartinly do, Senor Santo. I'd give almost anything ter belong to your band."

"Well, then, tie your horse."

Big Dan lost no time in doing this, and then he stepped before the villain, prepared for anything that might happen.

"I will have to blindfold you, Senor Dan," said Santo, as he took a handkerchief from his pocket.

"All right, I don't care what yer do. You'll find I'm true blue. I'll take any oath yer put me to, an' I'll stick ter it till I die, too."

"That is the way I like to hear a man talk. I am well satisfied that you will make a good member of our band. We lost two men to-day, so you shall take the place of one of them."

Very glad that he had followed the bad man, Wild watched and listened.

He made up his mind that he was going to see the interior of the brigand retreat, too.

When Senor Santo had blindfolded the candidate for admission into his band he led him straight to the mouth of the narrow pass and pushed him in ahead of him.

Wild stepped forward as softly as a cat, and when he was within but ten feet of the opening, the stone door came back into place with a dull thud.

"That's all right," the boy muttered, under his breath, "I reckon I'll find a way to get in."

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW BIG DAN WAS INITIATED.

Young Wild West had not even seen the entrance to the narrow pass that led to the cave of the brigands, but he had heard the sounds the stone made when it closed, and he made no mistake in where the spot was.

He reached it with amazing quickness, and as he listened he could hear voices coming from the other side, and also footsteps.

"Ah!" the brave boy muttered, under his breath. "A secret entrance, eh? Well, this is not the first time I have struck a situation like this. Now to find a way to get inside."

He waited until he could no longer hear the voices or footsteps, and then he threw his shoulder against the big flat stone.

It moved slightly, and satisfied that he would be able to force it open, he felt on either side, and was not long in locating the exact width of the pass.

Then he tried again, this time bringing more strength to bear.

The result was that the flat slab of rock swung around and dropped gently to the ground.

It made a noise in doing it, and fearing that it might have been heard by some one inside, Wild waited and listened.

He could hear voices coming from somewhere, but the sound was so faint that he knew it must be some little distance to the spot where the brigands were located.

Finding that no one came out, he was satisfied that it was safe to enter, so he lost no time in doing so.

It was dark as a pocket, for it happened that a portion of the way was covered by a sheltering rock.

But when he had gone a few feet he looked upward and saw the stars shining.

But even then he could not see the wide mouth of the cave, which was right before him, almost.

Wild decided to take the risk of lighting a match, which he did without delay.

Then it was that he saw the cave, and listening again he became satisfied that the voices came from it.

When the match had gone out he started forward and boldly stepped into the cave.

Then it was that he saw a faint light not far distant, and as his eyes became accustomed to it he was able to discern a number of horses, which were tied in a line at one side of the outer cave, and munching away at some hay.

"I certainly am in luck," he thought. "Well, while I am here I may as well take a good look around and see just how many of the brigands, as they choose to call themselves, there are. Then I will go back to Greaser Creek and prepare a surprise for them. I reckon Senor Santo's time is running short. I'll try and see to it that he does not make another hold-up, for I am well satisfied that we can corral the gang by noon to-morrow, if we work the game right."

He stepped softly along, and soon came to the opening that divided the two caves.

Then it was that he was able to see all that was to be seen in the hiding-place of the villainous Mexicans.

He counted the men and found there were just seventeen, including Big Dan, who was standing at one side of the cave with two of the brigands.

All the members of the band were there, since the two who had accompanied Santo to the mining camp had been waiting for him when he made his escape, and had come back to the cave with him in a hurry.

A handkerchief was tied over Big Dan's eyes, and Wild knew that Senor Santo was getting ready to initiate him as a member of the band.

Santo was very busy at the other end of the cave with a couple of his men, who were assisting him, no doubt, in making preparations for what was to come.

The rest of the rascals were talking in low tones, and the subject of the conversation was the initiation of the new member.

Wild stepped a little nearer, and then crouched down behind a jutting piece of rock.

He was bound to see it all, so he made up his mind to wait until it was over with, and then he would go out and try and close the improvised door of rock when he left.

Meanwhile, Senor Santo had his assistants place a barrel in about the center of the inner cave.

Over this was thrown a piece of black cloth, and upon it was laid two cross-bones and a human skull.

A candle was thrust into the skull, and striking a match, the leader of the brigands lighted it.

As the flame flared up and grew steady, he motioned for the other lights of the cave to be extinguished.

When this had been done the scene looked weird and ghostly enough.

A command from Santo brought the men in a semi-circle about the improvised altar, and then he called out, sharply:

"Bring the candidate to the altar."

The blindfolded bad man was led slowly forward, and when he was standing directly before the covered barrel, with its ghoulish emblems, the senor exclaimed:

"Raise your right hands, men!"

Up went the right hands of all present, including the two who had charge of the candidate.

Thus far the leader had spoken in Spanish, but he now resorted to English, since Big Dan no doubt would understand it much better.

"Senor," he said, "you have applied for admission into our band. Do you still feel a desire to become one of the Brigands of the Border?"

"I do," answered the bad man, quickly.

"Then you will kneel upon both knees and repeat after me an obligation, which every man here has taken, including myself. Are you willing to do this?"

"Yes."

"Kneel, then."

Down upon his knees the villain dropped, and then, in a slow, measured voice, pausing at every few words, Senor Santo said:

"I, Big Dan, do solemnly declare that I will never reveal the secret hiding-place of the Brigands of the Border. I furthermore swear that I will obey all orders of Senor Santo. I pledge myself to risk my life in helping a brother of the band, and that if I should be captured by an enemy I will suffer death before I will reveal anything about the doings or whereabouts of the Brigands of the Border. I furthermore swear that I will turn over all money I may take, either honestly or dishonestly, from any one not belonging to the band, to Senor Santo, so long as he may be our leader. In token of my sincerity in this obligation I now kiss the skull of an enemy who was slain while trying to force his way into the secrets of our band."

As he said the last one of the attendants lifted the skull from the altar and placed it to his lips.

Big Dan gave a hearty smack as his lips touched the object, and then the skull was placed back again.

Senor Santo gave a signal, and the members of the band stepped forward, each drawing a knife from his belt and holding it over the kneeling man's head.

Then the hoodwink was removed from Big Dan's eyes.

He blinked like an owl for a second or two, but did not seem to be much frightened.

"Rise, brother," Senor Santo said, stepping forward and putting out his hand.

The bad man took it and received a hearty grip as he arose to his feet.

"You have done well, my brother," said Santo, smiling at him, patronizingly. "If you had faltered in taking the obligation, you see what would have been in store for you," and he nodded to the uplifted knives, which were still pointed toward the new member. "But it's all right. I have every confidence in you, and though you are the only American belonging to our band, I feel that you will do your duty. You will now join us in drinking a glass of wine."

One of the men hastened to another part of the cave, and soon returned with a jug and several glasses.

The glasses were filled, and then still standing before the leader, in the dim light the sputtering candle gave out, Big Dan drank to them, not forgetting to drain his glass.

"That's mighty good wine, senor," he declared, smacking his lips. "I ain't in ther habit of drinkin' such stuff, I kin tell you."

"Well, there is plenty of it here, so you shall have more, Senor Dan."

One by one the members of the brigand band came forward and shook the new member by the hand.

When this was done he took a seat and more wine was poured out.

The lanterns were lighted, and the skull and cross-bones were removed, the barrel being put back in a corner.

"This is a mighty fine place you have got here," observed the bad man, as he sipped his wine. "I've been wantin' ter git in here a long time, an' I'm mighty glad I'm a member of your band now, Senor Santo."

"You may well feel proud of it, Senor Dan," was the retort. "Now, since you have taken the obligation and are a full-fledged member, I am going to appoint you to an important duty. I want you to lay out Young Wild West."

"I'll do that, willingly enough," was the quick retort. "I've got it in for that young galoot. I kin take pleasure in doing him up, all right."

"I thought so. That is why I have appointed you to that important duty. I will give you twenty-four hours in which to do this, so perhaps you had better go back to the mining camp soon, so you will have time to think over a plan."

"All right, Senor Santo. You kin bet I'll manage it all right. I'll do it so no one won't know how it was done, too. I ain't goin' ter pick no row with him, an' have a fight, 'cause I wouldn't stand much of a show. He kin shoot too quick for anything like that, so they say."

"Yes, I know quite well how he can shoot," and Senor Santo shook his head.

Wild was not a little amused at all he saw and heard, and thinking he had been there about long enough, since Big Dan was likely to leave at any time, he stole softly back into the pass and walked along to where the slab of stone lay upon the ground.

He took the risk of lighting a match to see how the secret door worked, and when he found out he was not long in lifting it so he was able to step outside and pull it into place.

This done, he went to where he had left his horse, and mounting, rode slowly back to the trail.

Once there, he started into a gallop and soon came to the slope that led down into the valley.

Wild did not stop at the hotel, but went right on to the camp.

He found the girls and Wing there, but Charlie, Jim and Hop had not yet returned.

"Well, I have been in great luck to-night, Et," he said, as he took a seat beside his sweetheart, who looked at him expectantly. "I have been in the secret cave of the Brigands of the Border."

"What do you mean, Wild?" Arietta asked, in surprise.

"Well, Senor Santo had the audacity to come down to the hotel in disguise. But I recognized him, just the same. He got in a game of draw poker with Hop and some miners, and after he had lost a hundred dollars in playing, he picked a row with Hop. I said something, and then he turned on me. The result was that he challenged me to fight a duel with knives. He had on a false beard, and

before this I attempted to pull it from his face, but found it would not come off. He had it stuck on in some way, and before we started the duel I told him that I was going to beat him and that I would spare his life under one condition, which was that he should permit his face to be shaved by the barber of the mining camp. He agreed to this, but when the time came to do it he threw a cup of coffee at me, and in the excitement that followed he leaped through a window and made his escape. Shortly after that the bad man, who is called Big Dan, left the hotel. That was when I came over and got Spitfire, as I told you, in a hurry. I followed Big Dan and managed to get into the cave. I had the pleasure of seeing the bad man initiated as a member of the brigands, and then I came back."

The girls wanted to know all about it, so he told everything in detail, and when he had concluded he left them and walked over to the hotel.

He found Charlie and Jim there laughing with the rest of the crowd at the antics of Hop, who had started in to amuse them with some of his sleight-of-hand tricks.

Wild was not long in calling his partners aside, and telling them of his adventure.

"Now then, boys," he said, "I reckon we'll make preparations to strike out in the morning and capture the brigands. I think we can work it so we can get them all alive, for I don't want to have to shoot any of them if I can help it."

"You fix it up, Wild," said the scout, with a nod of approval. "Me an' Jim will stick ter yer, an' don't yer forgit it."

Hop continued to amuse the crowd, and his antics kept every one in a roar of laughter almost continually.

In about half an hour Big Dan came in, just as though he had merely been over to his shanty for a while.

The bad man seemed very meek, and when he finally got into a game of cards with some miners our friends left the hotel and went back to camp.

CHAPTER IX.

BIG DAN GETS HIS MEDICINE.

Big Dan did not attempt to carry out his commission that night, so Young Wild West and his friends were not disturbed.

They were up shortly after daylight the next morning, and Wing, the cook, was ordered to hurry up with the breakfast.

Hop, who had come in very late, failed to be aroused when the others began moving about, so Cheyenne Charlie thought it advisable to wake him in a rather sudden manner.

Charlie looked around, and when he found there was a tree almost directly before the front of the tent he gave a nod of satisfaction and quickly got a lariat.

This he threw over a limb, and then crept softly into the tent, where the sleeping Chinaman lay upon a blanket.

Hop was snoring away peacefully, and it was easy for the scout to fasten the rope about his ankles.

Having done this, he gave a chuckle, and crept out of the tent.

"Now, then," he said, nodding to the rest, who were

looking on with no little interest, "ther first thing Hop knows he'll be hangin' head down from their limb of that tree. Everybody watch."

Seizing the other end of the rope, Charlie walked back from the tree until it was drawn taut.

Then he drew his gun and fired a shot in the air, at the same time leaping forward and pulling for all he was worth.

"Hip hi! Whattee mattee? Help, help!" came the startled cries, and then Hop was whisked from the tent, his feet shooting upward.

Not until they brought up against the limb did he stop, and there he hung, almost frightened out of his wits.

Wing paused in his work and looked on with undisguised pleasure, for nothing suited him better than to see his brother the victim of some joke.

This was because Hop was forever picking at him, and making him the butt of his practical joking.

The startled Chinaman was swinging his hands wildly, and doing his best to get into an upright position.

But this only caused him to sway back and forth like the pendulum of a clock, and all hands laughed heartily at his predicament.

But Charlie soon let him down, and as soon as he got upon the ground Hop lost no time in removing the rope from his ankles.

"Misler Charlie velly muchee smartee," he declared, shaking his fist at the grinning scout. "Me gittee square, allee light. Me no fool Chinees likee my blother."

"Can't yer ta a joke, yer heathen galoot?" Charlie asked, making out he was angry. "What was yer goin' ter do, sleep all day, when you know there's work for yer ter do this mornin'? Now you take my advice an' git a hustle on yer, an' look after ther horses. We want ter use 'em putty soon, so they ought ter have a fresh place ter graze on an' a good drink afore we start."

"Lat allee light, Misler Charlie; me no forgittee."

It hurt Hop to see them all laughing at him, but he lost no time in attending to his work, just the same.

When Hop had seen to the horses and taken a good wash in the brook he came back, appearing to be very cheerful.

"Me wakee uppee velly muchee quickee, Misler Charlie," he said, with a smile.

"I reckon yer did, Hop. I s'pose you'll be wakin' me up like that some time, if yer happen ter ketch me asleep. But I've never yet seen ther time when you could ketch me asleep."

The breakfast was soon ready, and then they all sat down to it and ate heartily.

Finally Charlie passed his tin cup to Wing to be filled with coffee again.

Hop was right near the cook and, unobserved by any one, he dropped something into the cup as it was being passed back to the scout.

When he had dumped a lump of sugar in it, Charlie proceeded to stir the coffee, and presently he placed the cup to his mouth.

He took a good swallow, and then an exclamation of disgust came from him, while he leaped to his feet in a hurry.

"What in thunder is ther matter with ther coffee, Wing? It's as bitter as gall."

"Me no undelstand, Misler Charlie," the cook answered, in surprise. "Coffee allee samee velly muchee goodee."

"Wow!" and Charlie ran to get a drink of water to take the taste from his mouth. "That's about ther bitterest dose I've had in a long time. What in thunder could have got in it?"

At this juncture Hop moved a short distance away, and the broad grin on his face was quite enough to convince Wild and the rest that he was responsible for the bad taste of the coffee.

It took the scout fully five minutes to get the bitter taste from his mouth, and then he began to make an investigation, so to speak.

He caught sight of the grinning Chinaman, and then it flashed upon him in a twinkling that he was responsible for it.

"What did you put in that coffee, Hop?" he cried, angrily, as he made a leap for him.

"Hip hi! hoolay!" Hop answered, and then he jumped across the creek and quickly disappeared in the bushes.

Charlie kept on after him, but Hop was so clever about dodging that he finally got up a tree without being observed.

The scout look around in vain, and then started to come back.

As he was passing under the tree the clever Chinese let something drop to the ground, right behind him.

It was a lighted firecracker, and the next instant a loud report sounded, which caused Charlie to jump with astonishment and make a grab for his gun.

But even then he did not know where the cracker had come from, and he again started to find the joker.

"I reckon you had better give it up, Charlie," Wild called out, after he had been at it for five minutes, with no results. "He told you he would get square with you, and I suppose he has. Come on and finish your breakfast, and then we'll strike out and see about corralling the brigands."

"All right, Wild," was the reply. "But jest wait till I ketch that heathen galoot. I'll twist his pig-tail so that he'll wish he had never bothered with me, blamed if I don't."

But Hop was wise enough to remain up the tree, and not until Wild and his partners had saddled their horses and mounted did he venture to come down.

It had been decided to leave the girls in camp, though Arietta had hinted that she would like to accompany them.

She said no more, however, but when Hop descended the tree and came to the camp after they had gone, she nodded to him and said:

"Well, Hop, suppose you and I go out in search of the brigands, too. I am just in the humor for a little excitement this morning. Not that I want to take part in any fighting, but I feel that I may be able to help them. I don't know just what Wild's plans are, but from what I heard him say, he is going to try to get into the brigands' cave and take them all prisoners. He has done such things before, so I suppose he will be able to do it this time. Do you want to go with me, Hop?"

"Me likee go velly muchee, Misse Alietta," was the quick reply.

"All right, then. See to it that you have a firecracker or two with you. There is nothing like the explosion of a cracker to startle a band of villains sometimes."

She was not long in saddling her horse, and Hop quickly got his piebald cayuse in readiness.

Then the two mounted and started off in the direction Wild and his partners had taken.

The three had not gone directly through the mining camp, but had taken a course to the left, so they would not be observed by any one.

Arietta remembered the spot where Santo and his men had left them on the trail along the mountainside, so she decided to ride up there and than take a look around on her own hook.

Though she looked behind her occasionally as she rode on with the clever Chinese, the girl had no idea that she was being followed.

But she was, just the same.

It happened that Big Dan had taken a notion to spy upon the camp of our friends, just after Wild and his partners left.

He had failed to see them ride away, but he caught sight of Arietta and Hop.

It occurred to the villain right away that it would be a good idea to capture the girl and take her to the brigands' cave, though he had not heard Senor Santo say anything about her.

He was not long in getting his horse, and then he left the camp by a roundabout way, and soon reached the trail that ran along the high ridge above the valley.

As he turned a bend he caught a glimpse of the girl and the Chinaman as they were riding slowly along, less than a hundred yards ahead of him.

He now started his horse at a gallop, and a minute later he bore down upon the unsuspecting girl and the Chinaman as they had come to a halt at the very spot where Senor Santo and his men had disappeared the afternoon before.

Arietta saw the bad man coming, and she could have easily rode away and left him behind.

But she was not afraid of him, so she waited until he came up.

"Good mornin', miss!" said Big Dan, bowing and tipping his hat in mock politeness.

"What do you want?" the girl asked, coolly.

"Oh, nothin'. I jest happened ter come along an' see yer here, that's all."

As the villain spoke he quickly pulled a gun and fired at Hop, who uttered a sharp cry and tumbled from the back of his horse.

Astounded at what had happened, Arietta uttered a cry of dismay and looked at the fallen Chinaman.

Before she could do anything to prevent it, the bad man rode up and caught her about the waist with his left arm and then rode away toward the secret cave of the brigands.

But the girl now realized that she was in peril and she made a desperate struggle to free herself.

As he was riding along the bank of a shallow pool, which helped feed the brook that ran down to the mining camp,

Arietta managed to tear herself from him, and down she went upon the ground.

At the same instant the sharp report of a rifle rang out, and Big Dan threw up his hands and fell from the saddle.

CHAPTER X.

THE BRIGANDS ARE CAPTURED.

Young Wild West and his partners rode swiftly, and were not long in reaching the higher ground above the mining camp.

It was our hero's intention to get as close as possible to the entrance of the brigands' cave, and then watch to see if any of them came out.

He told his partners of his plans as they rode along, and they both agreed with what he suggested.

"Now then, boys," said the young deadshot, as they turned from the trail and headed in the direction of the hidden cave. "We'll go a little slow, and when we get close enough we'll dismount and lie in wait. Come on."

The boy knew the way quite well, and it was not long before he thought it advisable to dismount.

The horses were left behind a clump of rocks near a cliff, so they would not be apt to be observed in case any of the brigands appeared.

Then the three crept forward and took positions where they would be able to watch the entrance to the pass.

The spot where they had decided to wait was a little higher than the other ground in the near vicinity, and they could command a view over quite a distance behind them.

They waited for perhaps ten minutes, and then they were suddenly startled by a revolver shot, which appeared to come from the trail they had left a short time before.

"What's that, Wild?" the scout asked, looking at the young deadshot questioningly.

"Some one fired a shot, Charlie," was the cool retort.

The next instant a scream sounded, and then it was that our hero's face turned slightly pale.

He recognized the voice as that of his sweetheart.

But Charlie and Jim did also, and the latter quickly said:

"What can Arietta be doing here, Wild?"

"I don't know, Jim," was the reply. "You two wait right here and I will go and see about it. If the brigands happen to come out, you go right into the cave and wait there. You will know what to do if they happen to come back before I do. I reckon the two of you will be able to manage it, since they will have to go in one at a time, as it is not wide enough for any more than that to ride through the pass to the cave."

Then just as coolly as though his sweetheart was not in danger, Young Wild West ran down to the left and hurriedly made his way in the direction the scream and shot had come from.

He had not gone more than a hundred feet when he heard the clatter of hoofs.

The boy quickly ran around an angle of rock, and then he saw Big Dan riding at a furious pace, and holding Arietta, who was struggling to escape from him, upon his horse.

The young deadshot raised his reliable Remington to his shoulder and took aim.

But before he got a bead upon him Arietta freed herself and fell to the ground.

Wild pulled the trigger, just the same, and he knew that Big Dan would never harm any one again.

The boy ran along the bank of the pool and saw his sweetheart trying to get up, though she was unable to do so.

"Are you hurt, Et?" he asked, as he went to her.

"Yes, Wild, I have sprained my ankle, I fear," she answered. "I landed heavily when I fell from the horse. I am so glad you were here, for I couldn't have got away after hurting my ankle, I suppose."

The boy thought a moment, for he did not know just what to do with his sweetheart in her almost helpless condition.

He looked around, and the most available spot he could see was a little grove that was further along the bank of the pool.

The young deadshot quickly lifted his sweetheart from the ground.

"Et," said he, "I am going to take you over there among the bushes and hide you. The chances are the brigands are out of their cave by this time, and Charlie and Jim are back there, with instructions to go inside the moment they come out, so they can catch them when they return. You will be all right, I reckon."

So saying, the boy stepped boldly into the pool and waded along, knee deep, toward the spot he had selected for her temporary hiding-place.

In another minute he would reach the spot he was heading for, for he had passed the rocky bluff.

"Does your sprained ankle hurt?" Wild asked Arietta, as he waded ashore with her in his arms.

She nodded.

Just then Senor Santo and his gang appeared in the bushes.

"Stand right where you are, Young Wild West!" Senor Santo hissed, while his face was lit up with a triumphant smile. "You have done exactly what I wanted you to. You have brought the golden-haired senorita to me. I may as well tell you that when I first saw her yesterday I made up my mind she would be my bride. Ha, ha, ha! How does that sound to your ears, Young Wild West? Your sweetheart is to be the bride of Senor Santo."

Knowing that he would surely keep his threat, Wild stopped.

"You have got me dead to rights, Senor Santo," he said, and then he waded ashore and permitted the villain to take Arietta from his arms.

"Seize him, my brave men!" cried the brigand leader.

"Oh, it isn't necessary to seize me," Wild answered, in his cool and easy way. "I submit."

"You are wise in saying that, for though I intend to surely kill you, I would rather talk to you awhile in my retreat. Disarm him, Pedro."

Pedro, who was holding the boy by the arm, nodded and quickly relieved him of his weapons.

"Now, then, come on. I will have the pleasure of carrying the fair senorita to the cave. They were pretty bold

to come up this way, I am sure, but I am very glad they did."

The brigands now hurried along and soon came to the slab of stone that hid the mouth of the narrow pass from view.

One of the Mexicans pushed upon it and it fell inside with a thud.

The senior stepped on through, still carrying Arietta.

Pedro came next, with Wild close behind him, who was being urged along by another Mexican.

Wild had not gone more than ten feet when he felt a revolver placed in his hand.

He knew, then, that Charlie and Jim were there, and satisfied that the time had arrived to act, he called out, sharply:

"Line up, you scoundrels, and hold up your hands! You are trapped. I have twenty men concealed here in the cave."

Senor Santo uttered a cry of amazement, and let Arietta fall to the ground.

At the same instant the entrance was closed, with a thud, and Cheyenne Charlie's voice exclaimed:

"Whoopie! whoopie! Wow! Up with your hands!"

The fact was that Jim was at one end of the passage and the scout had remained at the other.

It was Jim who had handed Wild the revolver.

He now stepped forward and grabbed Senor Santo by the collar, at the same time pushing the muzzle of a gun under his nose.

"Get your men to surrender instantly or I'll shoot you dead, you scoundrel!" the boy exclaimed.

Dismayed and almost terror-stricken, Senor Santo called out, wildly:

"Surrender, men! Don't let me be shot in this way."

Up went the hands of all of them, and then the scout marched through and disarmed them, a grim smile on his face as he did so.

"Boys," said Wild, nodding his head toward the cave, "don't come out just yet. We want the satisfaction of tying the hands of this gang. Then you can take charge of them and march them down to the mining camp."

It is doubtful if there was one of the brigands who did not think that there was a crowd of men in the cave waiting to take part in the capture.

The result was that Charlie and Arietta, who found she could walk by limping slightly, went from one to the other of the brigands and tied their hands behind them.

This done, the scout brought forth a lariat and hitched them all together.

Then he stepped back and removed the obstruction from the mouth of the pass.

"That's right, Charlie," called out our hero, in triumph. "Now, then, we will march them down to Greaser Creek. The miners can bring up the rear. Ha, ha, ha!"

They had been caught dead to rights, and there was no chance to escape now, so when the command was given the brigands marched in single file out of the passage.

Senor Santo brought up the rear, followed by Jim Dart, while Wild hastened to get the horses.

He assisted Arietta to the back of Spitfire, and then told

her to lead the other two along, as they would walk down the mountainside with the prisoners.

What was the surprise of the miners when half an hour later they saw Young Wild West leading a gang of prisoners into the camp.

Not until they got there did Arietta think of Hop.

Then she quickly told Wild that he had been shot.

But while they were talking about it the Chinaman suddenly appeared, smiling blandly.

"Me allee samee gittee shootee, Misler Wild," he said, pointing to the side of his head, where there was a red mark, "but um bullet only makee me feelee lillee foolish, so be. Me gittee allee light pretty quickee, and len comee back here to gittee help."

It was not long before the prisoners were secured in a shanty, and guarded by half a dozen determined men.

Then the man who had been elected as judge of the camp summoned a jury and a short trial was held.

Of course, there could only be one verdict in a case of the kind. There was no such thing as law and order on the border, just then, and it was decided that the whole crowd should be hanged.

But it seemed that this was not to be put in effect, for as the miners were getting ready to proceed, in spite of the protests of Wild, who wanted them to turn them over to the authorities at the nearest town, a troop of Mexican calvary rode into the mining camp.

It happened that they had been long searching for the brigands, and when they learned that the entire band had been captured they were overjoyed.

As there was a dispute about what country they were in at the time, the miners were forced to submit, so the prisoners were turned over to the cavalymen, who bore them away in triumph a little latter.

"Well, I reckon that piece of business was quickly settled up, when we got started at it, boys," Young Wild West remarked to his partners, after they had managed to get away from the admiring crowd and were sitting at the camp. "I don't know as there is much here to keep us, so we'll strike out to-morrow morning for some other parts."

"Jest as you say, Wild," the scout answered.

Arietta declared that her ankle would be well enough to set out the next day, so after putting in a day there, during which congratulations were constantly poured upon them by the pleased miners of Greaser Creek, they settled down for a good night's rest, and the next morning they all set out from the spot, taking the trail that led to the northeast.

Next week's issue will contain "YOUNG WILD WEST CALLING THE CAVALRY; OR, ARIETTA'S THRILLING RIDE."

SPECIAL NOTICE:—All back numbers of this weekly except the following are in print: 1 to 40, 42, 44, 45, 47, 50 to 52, 63, 69, 78, 88, 90, 102, 105. If you cannot obtain the ones you want from your newsdealer, send the price in money or postage stamps by mail to FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 24 UNION SQUARE, NEW YORK CITY, and you will receive the copies you order, by return mail.

Wild West Weekly

NEW YORK, APRIL 21, 1911.

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SOME GOOD ARTICLES.

A story is told of a well-known actor-manager when on tour last year. On the first night of his stay in a certain border town there were cries for a speech, and at last the genial actor stepped before the curtain. He thanked the audience for its gratifying demonstration, and let fall in conclusion some pleasing remarks about the beauties of the town, but the speech was received in frozen silence. When he got behind the curtain he remarked to the local manager that the good people of — seemed singularly unresponsive. "Yes," replied the manager, "you see, your speech was all right except in one particular. You kept mentioning the name of the town where you were playing last week."

Unusual visibility of lights has been reported to the Hydrographic Office by Capt. Thomas E. Clinch of the Heald Bank Lightship, Gulf of Mexico. He states that on the night of January 16 the fog cleared after being almost continuous for a week. At 8 A.M. on January 17 an object was sighted which appeared to be a channel buoy or small boat. He lowered the motor boat and proceeded toward it. After going in its direction for ten miles he made it out to be a schooner, hull down, probably six miles further away. At 7 P.M. the lights of the city of Galveston were plainly visible. Between 7 and 9 P.M. Bolivar light, thirty-three miles distant, was easily seen regularly flashing every ten seconds. The observations were taken from a height above sea level of ten feet.

The winter is witnessing the passing of natural gas in some Ohio towns. For the first time in many years residents are compelled to use coal and wood for fuel. The Madison Gas & Oil Co. that has furnished the fuel at Gibsonburg issued a statement notifying its patrons that the gas supply had gradually dwindled until it was no longer possible to supply the public. Every effort has been made by officials of the Madison company to connect its mains with those of some of the many companies operating in the central Ohio fields, but without result. Once the gas center of Ohio, the final failure of the gas is a sad blow to Gibsonburg. That it was a luxury was never realized until the present. During years past the gas was so plentiful that it was wasted with recklessness, as if the supply would never be exhausted. Residents of nearby villages are still enjoying the privileges of gas, although the pressure is weak at times.

The riddle of Lake Raikal, in central Asia, is similar to that of Lake Tanganyika, in central Africa. In both cases a large

body of fresh water remote from the ocean contains organisms apparently marine. Both lakes, again, contain a very large number of species not found elsewhere. Lake Baikal contains numerous salmon and seals, as well as three species of herring. It also contains a few mollusca of apparently marine forms. One of the most remarkable features of the lake, perhaps, is that although it is frozen over for about five months in the year the animal life is extremely abundant and varied. This may be partly accounted for, perhaps, by the existence of hot springs. One of the latest attempts to answer the riddle of Lake Baikal is that of the Russian investigator, M. Berg. Of the thirty-three species of fish found in the lake he finds that fourteen are peculiar to it, while nineteen have a wide distribution in Siberia and Europe. Many of these peculiar species are without near relations anywhere. Of the mollusca 90 per cent. are peculiar. M. Berg does not think the facts demand the hypothesis that the lake was once marine. He believes that it has always been fresh and that the fauna peculiar to it has had a twofold origin. A part has originated in the lake itself during the long ages of its existence, and the first is a portion of the prehistoric fresh water fauna of Siberia which it has preserved.

GRINS AND CHUCKLES.

The Preacher—And does your husband vote as he prays?
The Wife—Oh, yes; about once a year!

Mother-in-law—I have been with you two weeks now, my children! Son-in-law (without hesitation)—Two weeks, nine hours, and twenty minutes!

Uncle James couldn't read. He went into a restaurant one day, and when the waiter handed him a bill of fare he said: "Thankee, son, but Ah never reads befo' meals."

A woman went into a New York hotel the other day and said: "I would like to have a room and bath." The clerk said: "We will be glad to let you have the room, madam, but you will have to give yourself the bath."

Lew Dockstader once advised me never to do a long act. "You must never tire your audience," he said, "but leave them while they still want you." That's the way I once left an audience in St. Louis. I saw they wanted me and I left them. At one time it looked a bit as though they were going to get me.

The other morning, after a night with the boys, I felt a bit indisposed and went to the drug store to get a little something that would brace me up and settle my nerves. Behind the soda counter was a fly clerk who asked me what I'd have. Being in a kind of stupor and undecided what to take, I said: "I don't know. What would you take if you were me?" He looked at me a minute and said, "Poison."

Uncle Toby was expected to die any minute. His faithful wife was sobbing at his bedside. "Oh, Toby! Yoh is goin' to leave me!" "Lemme go in peace, den," said the old darkie with a groan. "Your hands an' feet is cold already!" sobbed Aunt Sallie. "But, Tobey, oh, what is to become of me when you is gone?" "I isn't worryin' over dat!" grunted Uncle Toby. "What's botherin' me is what's goin' ter become ob me when I is gone!"

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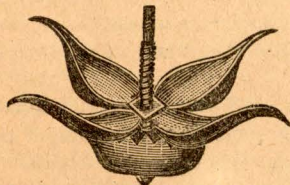
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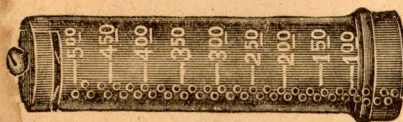
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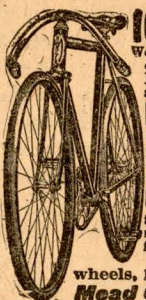
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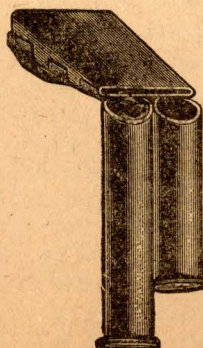
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THE BAD BOY IN LOVE

By Paul Braddon.

"Well, how's your eye?" said the grocery man to the bad boy. "Had any more fights protecting girls from dudes?"

"No, everything is quiet so far. But I have had the hardest week I ever experienced jerking soda for the Young Men's Christian Association," said the boy, as he peeled a banana. "You know there has been a National Convention of delegates from all the Young Men's Christian Associations of the country—about three hundred—here, and our store is right on the street where they passed four times a day, and I never saw such appetites for soda. But the Christian Association Convention has caused a coldness between pa and ma."

"How's that? Your par isn't jealous, is he?" and the grocery man came around from behind the counter to get the latest gossip to retail to the hired girls who traded with him.

"Jealous nothin'," said the boy, as he took a few raisins out of a box. "You see, the delegates were shuffled out to all the church members to take care of, and they dealt two to ma, and she never told pa anything about it. They came to supper the first night, and pa didn't get home, so when they went to the convention in the evening ma gave them a night-key, and pa came home from the boxing-match about eleven o'clock, and ma was asleep. Just as pa got most of his clothes off he heard somebody fumbling at the front door, and he thought it was burglars.

"Pa has got nerve enough when he is on the inside of the house and the burglars are on the outside. He opened a window and looked out and saw two suspicious looking characters trying to pick the lock with a skeleton key, and he picked up a new slop-jar that ma had bought when we moved, cover and all, and dropped it down right between the two delegates. Gosh, if it had hit one of them there would have been the solemnest funeral you ever saw. Just as it struck they got the door open and came in the hall, and the wind was blowing pretty hard and they thought a cyclone had taken the cupola off the house.

"They were talking about being miraculously saved, and trying to strike a match on their wet pants, when pa went to the head of the stairs and pushed over a wire stand filled with potted plants, which struck pretty near the delegates, and one of them said the house was coming down sure, and they better go into the cellar, and they went down and got behind the furnace. Pa called me up and wanted me to go down the cellar and tell the burglars we were onto them, and for them to get out, but I wasn't very well, so pa locked his door and went to bed.

"I guess it must have been half an hour before pa's cold feet woke ma up, and then pa told her not to move for her life, 'cause there were two of the savagest-looking burglars that ever was rummaging over the house. Ma smelled pa's breath to see if he had got to drinking again, and then she got up and hid her oreide watch in her shoes, and her Onalaska diamond earrings in the Bible, where she said no burglar would ever find them; and pa said he wasn't afraid, and he and ma went down the cellar.

"Pa stood on the bottom stair and looked around, and one of the delegates said, 'Mister, is the storm over, and is your family safe?' and ma recognized the voice and said, 'Why, it's one of the delegates. What you doing down there?' and pa said, 'What's a delegate?' and then ma explained it, and pa apologized, and the delegate said it was no matter, as they had enjoyed themselves real well in the cellar. Ma was mortified most to death, but the delegates told her it was all right. She

was mad at pa first, but when she saw the broken slop-bowl on the front steps, and the potted plants in the hall, she wanted to kill pa, and I guess she would only for the society of the delegates. She couldn't help telling pa he was a bald-headed old fool, but pa didn't retaliate. He is too much of a gentleman to talk back in company. All he said was that a woman who is old enough to have delegates sawed off on to her ought to have sense enough to tell her husband, and then they all drifted off into conversation about the convention and the boxing match, and everything was all right on the surface; but after breakfast, when the delegates went to the convention, I noticed pa went right downtown and bought a slop-jar and some more plants. Pa and ma didn't speak all the forenoon, and I guess they wouldn't up to this time only ma's bonnet come home from the milliner's and she had to have some money to pay for it. Then she called pa 'pet,' and that settled it.

"But, say, those Christian young men do a heap of good, don't they? Their presence seems to make people better. Some boys down by the store were going to tie a can on a dog's tail yesterday, and somebody said 'Here comes the Christian Association, and those bad boys let the dog go. They tried to find the dog after the crowd had got by, but the dog knew his business. Well, I must go down and charge the soda fountain for a picnic that is expected from the country.'

"Hold on a minute," said the grocery man, as he wound a piece of brown paper around a cob and stuck it in a syrup-jug he had just filled for a customer, and then licked his fingers. "I want to ask you a question. What has caused you to change so from being bad? You were about as bad as they make 'em, up to a few weeks ago, and now you seem to have a soul, and get in your work doing good about as well as any boy in town. What is it that ails you?"

"Oh, sugar, I don't want to tell," said the boy, as he blushed, and wiggled around on one foot, and looked silly. "But if you won't laugh I will tell you. It is my girl that has made me good. It may be only temporary. If she goes back on me I may be tuff again, but if she continues to hold out faithful I shall be a daisy all the time. Say, did you ever love a girl? It would do you good. If you loved anybody, regular old-fashioned, the way I do, people could send little children here to trade, and you wouldn't palm off any wilted vegetables on to them, or give them short weight. If you was in love, and felt that the one you loved saw every act of yours, and you could see her eyes every minute, you would throw away anything that was spoiled and not try to sell it, for fear that you would offend her.

"I slipped upon a banana peel yesterday, and hurt myself, and I was just going to say something offul, and I could see my girl's bangs raise right up, and there was a pained look in her face and a tear in her eye, and, by gosh, I just smiled and looked tickled till her hair went down and the smile came back again to her lips, though it hurt me like fury where I struck the sidewalk. I was telling pa about it, and asked him if he ever felt as though his soul was going right out towards somebody, and he said he did once on a steamboat excursion, but he eat a lemon and got over it. Pa thinks it is my liver, and wants me to take pills, but I tell you, boss, it has struck in me too deep for pills, unless it is one that weighs about one hundred and forty pounds and wears a hat with a feather on. Say, if my girl should walk right into a burning lake of red-hot lava and beckon me to follow, I would take a hop, skip and jump, and—"

"Oh, give us a rest," said the grocery man as he took a basin of water and sprinkled the floor, preparatory to sweeping out. "You have got the worst case I ever saw, and you better go out and walk around a block," and the boy went out and forgot to hang out any sign.

(A SERIAL STORY)

THE EMPTY SADDLE

OR,

THE WILD HORSE OF RED RIVER

By KIT CLYDE.

PROLOGUE.

"On, on, my gallant fellow; my life depends on your speed. But hold out a few hours longer and we will be safe."

It is a thrilling scene.

The sun hangs low in the western sky and a vast and dreary waste of plain and prairie stretches out in one endless expanse, almost as far as the eye can reach.

In the dim distance, where the blue sky seems to dip down and touch the earth, there is what appears to be a grove of trees, but the experienced plainsman would know at once that it might only be a deception. A mere cloud, or more probably a mirage, caused by the reflection of the sun on the sand.

It has been a long, hot day in Texas. Old plainsmen have said it was one of the most trying days they had passed for years.

The scene spread before the reader is not of barren wastes, short buffalo grass, hot sands, and quivering heat alone. It is an animated scene. A wild—a terrible scene.

A man covered with dust and sand, mounted on a horse the color of which owing to dust, dirt and perspiration, it is impossible to determine, is flying for his life before a dozen painted demons, who are pressing close after him. The wildest shouts rend the air, and the brandishing of weapons indicate that the chase and flight are for life.

With wild, distorted eyes the horseman presses his spurs into the flanks of his gallant steed.

"Oh, I must not die—I must live—the whole thing shall be known to the world," he gasped, as he lashed his horse and pressed on. "Fly, fly, my gallant steed, and save your unfortunate master."

The horse, urged thus by the master's voice and the stinging spur, seemed to rouse his flagging energies and thundered on over the plain at a renewed speed. The dust and sand rose in a cloud, enveloping the horseman, and for a moment screening him from view of his pursuers.

But that pillar of dust told them where their victim was, and with wild yells they thundered on after him. One moment hope seemed to fill the breast of the fugitive with joy, to be succeeded at the next by despair.

"Oh, to die now—now, just at the dawn of triumph!" groaned the man who fled for his life.

Though his pursuers were painted and bedecked as Indians, the experienced plainsman would know at a glance that they were white men in disguise. They carried rifles, and though they were a dozen times in range of the fugitive and could have shot him down with ease, they did not do so. Strange mysterious was the flight and pursuit.

The fugitive realized that his life was only spared that he might be subjected to the most horrible tortures. But death and torture seemed to concern him less than some great secret which he was guarding with his life. His fate was sealed when the vultures which soared above him seemed to be waiting for a dainty feast.

The sun sinks lower and lower until it is on a level with the horizon, and the pursuers, fearing that he might in the

darkness escape them, urge their tired horses to renewed speed. But, alas! The fugitive's hope is gone. As the sun sinks beneath the horizon, there suddenly starts up from one of the deep and unexpected ravines which on the plains are called gullies, a man mounted on a swift-footed horse. He has a lasso in his hand, and dashing wildly at the fugitive flings the noose over his head, and in a moment jerks him from the gallant horse which was straining every nerve to save his master.

Twilight on the plains is of very short duration. No sooner has the sun set than it is dark, and by the time the man who had been roped and jerked from his steed ceased to struggle on the ground it was quite dark.

"Hold!" thundered the new-comer, who had lassoed the fugitive as the pursuers came up. "Hold, fools, would you ride over him?"

"Oho! have you got him?" cried one who had led the pursuers.

"Yes; but he is nothing. Don't let the horse go."

"No, no, where is he?"

"I do not know. After him."

Then the band of pursuers scattered in every direction in the vain pursuit of the horse.

The scene changes. Two hours later we find ourselves on the banks of a stream, by the side of which the band of pursuers and he with the broad brimmed hat and lasso are gathered. A fire is burning, and by the light of it we can see the pale-faced, wild-eyed prisoner—he who had made such a gallant flight for his life.

He sits in the midst of his captors and stares at them with eyes which, in their wild agony, show but too plainly that reason totters.

The man with the white hat, who beyond a doubt is leader, breaks a long silence by saying:

"You must tell us the secret."

"I can't," says the prisoner.

"You must."

"I cannot."

"You will."

The pale-faced, wild-eyed prisoner made no answer, but shook his head sadly and fixed his great eyes on the blazing fire.

The captors sat glaring at him as so many ravenous wolves, or conversed in whispers as to the means of making him reveal the secret or mystery which was safely locked in his breast, but he was silent as the grave.

The tall, dark-whiskered man, at last exasperated by the continued silence of the prisoner rose, and going over to him cried:

"We intend to kill you, do you hear that; we are going to kill you."

The prisoner slowly raised his head and glared at him in silence.

"Do you want to die?"

There was no answer to this. The chief looked about at

his horribly painted and plumed band and received an assuring nod.

"The sooner we get it over with the better," growled one.

"But he shall tell."

"You may lead a pony to water, but all the powers on earth can't make him drink," replied the other speaker.

"I will find means to wring it from him."

Then stooping over the bound and helpless man, he seized him by the shoulders and shook him until his teeth seemed to rattle in his head, and cried:

"I will break your stubborn silence or I will be your death."

Only a sullen stare was the answer.

"Oh, you can glare at me in defiance that way, but I will find the means to unlock your tongue before I have finished you. Listen: You shall die a most horrible death. A lingering death that always hovers near but never comes. Before your dissolution, you shall with your own eyes see the vultures and cayotes come to feast on your body. Oh, I have not set out in vain for the secret. I will have it or you will display a fortitude such as no man ever showed before in all the world's history. Speak now, will you? One word, only one spares you. Silence condemns you."

Only the wild, vacant stare was the prisoner's reply.

"It is settled. You are doomed?" cried the chief.

* * * * *

Again the scene changed.

A wild desolate region. A dreary waste of plain and desert stretching away to the east until the eye grows weary gazing upon it, and to the west a long wending chain of mountains looking more dreary and desolate in the approaching night.

Like a horn of silver the moon hangs in the ethereal vault of heaven, while the lambent glow of an evening star shoots athwart the path of departing day.

High in the air, at one moment, soaring above the world below, and next swooping down as if to kiss the earth is a great black-winged vulture. Again and again does it swoop down upon the earth as if to seize upon some object of prey, when a wild shriek frightens it, and sends it once more soaring aloft in the sky.

The dainty meal, which the vulture has all day watched with a hungry eye, is a man tied down to strong stakes, driven in the earth so that he cannot move. Twice has the sun rose, pursued its course and set, since the strange, wild-eyed prisoner has been tied down flat upon his back upon the plain. A wonderful change has come upon him. His face is parched, his tongue so swollen as to protrude from his mouth, and his bloodshot eyes have almost grown glassy. A strange light plays over his countenance, and he writhes and tears at his bonds, heedless of bleeding wrists and ankles, while he shrieks: "Revenge—revenge—revenge!"

Agony and terror have at last unseated his reason, and the bound and helpless prisoner is a raving maniac, with a soaring vulture above him, and half a score of coyotes watching and waiting for the moment of his dissolution to commence their feast. And the night grows darker.

CHAPTER I.

THE WILD HORSE HUNTERS.

"Talking o' odd things, boys, minds me o' what I saw last week on the Cimaron."

The speaker was a tall, bronzed-cheeked man of forty-five, whose buckskin suit, broad brim hat and huge spurs indicated him to be either a herder, cowboy or wild horse hunter. The latter was his calling, and all over the plains this individual was known as Old Buck.

He and three other men were sitting about a camp fire on

the north fork of the Canadian, and as Old Buck made the remark, he stooped over, deliberately picked up a living coal of fire with his fingers and placed it on his refilled pipe.

"What was it, Buck?"

The man asking the question, like all the others, was a wild horse hunter, perhaps ten years younger than Old Buck, with short, sandy beard, and eyes inclined to squint, which, on the plains, gave him the soubriquet Squint-Eyed Bob.

The other two men were Bill Snow and Sam Patchen, great, bronze-faced plainsmen, inured to hardships and dangers of every kind.

"Wall now, pilgrim, ye mought think I warn't tuk in wi' that air leetle diskivery o' mine upon the Cimaron," said Old Buck, puffing away at his pipe until he got it started.

"Tell us about it, Buck," said Bob.

"Wall, it's considerable o' a yarn. Ye see, last week I was just a-comin' into Fort Snell, and knowed nothin' o' this wild goose chase we're on, and was makin' good, easy time, for I didn't want ter push my horse too hard. O' nights I always slept under a tree or on the prairie, my annermill picketed near by. I hadn't hit the prairie yit, and war expectin' I'd have ter pass the night in the woods.

"The sun was low, and gettin' lower fast. Soon I knowed I'd be in the dark, and I was figgerin' on how I was agoin' ter pass the night, when blame if I didn't see— Wall, guess what I did see, boys."

"Injuns," said Bob.

"A grizzly bear," put in Bill.

"Neither."

"What war it, Buck?"

"A smoke."

"A smoke o' gammon, what of that?" said Squint-Eyed Bob.

"A good deal, Bob, when ye come ter think that nobody lives in five hundred miles o' that air spot."

"Wall, it was a boomers' camp."

"Not by a jug full."

"What did it come from?"

"A house."

"A house, Buck? Why no one lives thar."

"Yer wrong, Bob."

"Thar don't; I tell yer I've been all over that country, traveled it from end to end a dozen or more times, an' ef anybody had ever lived on the head waters of the Cimaron I guess I'd a-seen somethin' o' 'em."

Old Buck puffed away at his pipe for a few moments in silence, and then said:

"Wall, Bob, I once thought I knew suthin' o' them woods myself. I've been over and through 'em until I was quite sartin that thar warn't a particle o' 'em that I couldn't travel blindfold, but we don't neither o' us know nuthin' o' 'em at all. Neither me nor you.

"As I was tellin', I was just beginnin' ter look out a place fur the night, when all to onct, I see the smoke and like you supposed it Injuns, or boomers. Now knowin' it mought be some o' the Apaches or Cheyennes on the warpath, I was a leetle bit skittish, and so I creeped up clusser and clusser, a leadin' old Yaller-tail, my hoss, arter me, until I came in sight o' a house, and thar a settin' in a cheer in front o' the house, was a quare kind uv a feller."

"A white man?"

"Yes."

"Who wuz he?"

"I dun know. Fust I thought it mought be the B an' some o' Big Perry's band o' road agents, who so go up toward No Man's Land ter hide; but he didn't either. So I ventured down ter whar he sat in the he didn't raise his head until I spoke to him.

(Continued in next week's issue.)

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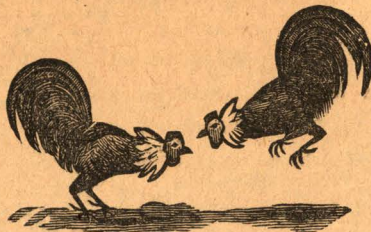
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